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## Editors' Introduction: Materializing Immaterial Labor in Cultural Studies

by Robert F. Carley, Stefanie A. Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula

| Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** This introduction frames the six original articles in this issue and the forum on "Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope" around the concept of immaterial labor. Two full years into a pandemic that has uprooted place-based work for many, and forced even more indoors, away from public spaces, and onto screens, we reflect on the very material effects of present-day immaterial and emotional labor.

**KEYWORDS** cultural studies, immaterial labor, pandemic, COVID-19, class

The concept of immaterial labor has cut a wide swath into contemporary cultural studies' theoretical, conceptual, and interpretive terrain. For example, this issue's lead article by Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, "First-Person Shooters, Tunnel Warfare, and the Racial Infrastructures of the US–Mexico Border," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/first-person-shooters-tunnel-warfare-racial-infrastructures-us-mexico-border-llamas-rodriguez/> > considers the way that the virtual modeling and gamification of the border is connected to the very real and material infrastructures, institutions, and industries that constitute it concretely. As a concept, immaterial labor provides insight into the relationships that mediate culture (or culture industries), labor, and the commodity form. According to Maurizio Lazzarato:

The concept of immaterial labor refers to *two different aspects* of labor. On the one hand, as regards the "informational content" of the commodity, it refers directly to the changes taking place in workers' labor processes in big companies in the industrial and tertiary sectors, where the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication). On the other hand, as regards the activity that produces the "cultural content" of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work" — in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.<sup>1</sup>

The labor process has clearly altered what we mean when we talk about work, but has it changed our understanding of class? It can, when we view it in a broader context.

Lazzarato's definition of immaterial labor is part of a larger "tradition" that views technological changes in the labor process as a large piece in the puzzle that constitutes class struggles. The metaphor of a puzzle is particularly apt since, as Mario Tronti asserted, "Nobody has discovered anything more about the working class after Marx; it still remains an unknown continent. One knows for certain that it exists, because everyone has heard it speak, and anyone can hear fables about it. But no one can say: I have seen and understood."<sup>2</sup>

The labor process was significantly changed in the era of post-war industrial capital. Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, and, especially, Romano Alquati (and others) began to de-emphasize the centrality of class consciousness (a late nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century concept) to the political process within (and in some cases against) which classes struggle and, instead, saw, especially through Alquati's writing on the Fiat and Olivetti factories, that technical changes to the labor process were connected to the political, organizational, and strategic activity of classes. The technical aspects of the production process informed the ways that workers struggled, strategized, and organized. It was also these technical aspects of the labor process that could be used to break the back of worker movements and alter the terrain of class struggles.

This class analysis can be extended beyond post-war Italy. The contemporary service sector, grown in the era of global neoliberalism, presents a similar period of transformed labor processes, and might therefore offer concomitant transformations in class struggle, organizing, and strategy—as well as a similarly-altered terrain for breaking the worker's movement. One example is found in conceptual shifts (driven by broader social and economic forces and neatly embodied in universities' administrative strata) at colleges and universities that have both amplified and warped relations amongst university workers and between students and faculty. The conversion of tenure track and tenured faculty lines to instructional, lecturer, and adjunct positions is one structural outcome of the contradictions that all universities face, but especially public and state schools. The experiences of overwhelmed and overburdened non-tenure line and other precarious faculty (such as women and trans faculty of color and disabled faculty) are amplified by the kinds of immaterial services they provide to students. And, as more faculty find themselves in increasingly precarious circumstances in addition to negotiating the precarious situations of their students, immaterial labor, in this context, can be specified through Sara Warner's description of a "rage slave." According to Warner, "A rage slave is a wage slave in a service economy, someone who sells both her labor power and her emotions" under the threat of starvation and poverty.<sup>3</sup> There are many attendant problems with using "slave" as an abstract or analogous concept in a world where slavery both was and is real. But Warner's concept of laboring and emoting under threat is nonetheless valuable. The university's expanded demands for emotional labor is first and foremost another form of speedup, "accelerated output without increased pay."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Warner cautions us against utopic hopes for emotional labor, noting "Affective labor often results in the double exploitation of workers, in the commodification of their bodies and emotions."<sup>5</sup>

If these are shifted/shifting labor processes, what strategies might be learned from the technical process of laboring immaterially? What does it take to produce a sense of

community meaning and belonging, and in particular to produce the workplace or the classroom as a site of that community meaning and belonging? The collective grief, numbness, and despair of two years of laboring through a pandemic has shown the production of the academy as a space/practice of immaterial labor, has revealed the cracks in the veneer of “productivity” that hide this work as service industry work. What might it mean to learn from this period of collective (although by no means universal) mourning? After the death of a loved one, or the loss of hundreds of thousands of strangers, the cost of faking your smile has increased. Of small talk in the elevator; of a polite and timely reply to an email; of attention in a committee meeting; of using a screen to generate human connection rather than withdraw from it. What parts of the academy that we wish to change does our immaterial labor uphold? What might it mean to learn from the numerous powerful workers’ responses to the capital strike, in and beyond #Striketober? How might we utilize that #Striketober energy to transform these conditions?<sup>6</sup>

In media and cultural studies, recent work on platform or app-based service sector labor has begun to focus on the ways that workers have captured and developed new media and communication technologies to serve class struggles. In the introduction to *The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence*, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Todd Wolfson, Brian Dolber, and Chenjerai Kumanyika describe how the creation of an organizing platform for the Rideshare Drivers United union in Los Angeles, California served to build “. . . its membership base throughout the prior year, using a hybrid online and face-to-face organizing strategy that integrated communications across an organizing app they developed in-house with advertising on social media, text messaging, phone calls, and one-on-one conversations” <sup>7</sup>. Seen through the lenses of immaterial labor and class composition, these first salvos in what could comprise a new class struggle require us to think with both concepts. The immaterial or communicative labor necessary to arrange services (what Lazzarato refers to above as activities not normally recognized as work) became the foundations for creating an oppositional platform through which a politically and technologically decomposing working class—reeling from the long neoliberal conjuncture—began to recompose; to draw from the technological conditions of the labor process and create new means of organization and struggle.

Cultural studies would do well to keep its eyes fixed on both sides of the ledger: the immaterial and material; class struggle and commodity production; labor and capital. As cultural studies continues to consider the role that immaterial forms of culture play in contemporary culture industries’ labor processes, it mustn’t fail to address as a part of its political project the emerging frameworks that engender various forms of politics from below. It is only commodity fetishism, which creates the illusion of our independence, that obscures how closely these structures are at work, and how closely entwined material labor is with immaterial, and that revolutionary transformation depends on revolutionary interdependence across social position and type of work.

In today’s context, questions pertaining to immaterial labor and the material circuits and acts that help to sustain it are tied together in examples like the one above from *The Gig Economy*. The span of the pandemic has heightened the conjunctural contradictions of the capital and its many relations (production, distribution, and consumption of commodities,



the social reproduction of forms of labor, etc.), especially including its racially-hierarchizing technologies of governance, surveillance, policing, restricted mobilities, and environmental destruction. Many of the articles in this issue and the forum address the very material effects of present-day immaterial and emotional labor.

A focus on contemporary labor and class relations in the framework of immaterial labor and, more explicitly, the pandemic necessarily raises the issue of social reproduction. In this issue, Sean Cashbaugh's richly sourced article, "Back to Basics with Labor-Power: The Problem of Culture and Social Reproduction Theory," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/back-to-basics-with-labor-power-culture-social-reproduction-theory-cashbaugh/> > carefully connects the threads of contemporary cultural studies to fundamental and emergent Marxist concepts. Cashbaugh's article sutures nineteenth-century concepts in Marx's thought with twenty-first-century readings of contemporary contradictions and crises. Stressing the "laborious" aspects of immaterial labor, we might interpret, in the context of the pandemic, how Cashbaugh's claim both illuminates and marks the necessary social and cultural complexity of the commodity form. We see, through this claim, the connections between social reproduction and immaterial labor. Cashbaugh states that, ". . . cultural studies scholars rarely consider labor-power as anything other than a fully formed commodity ready for sale in the market, examining it from the standpoint of its circulation rather than its production. This leaves the question of culture's relation to labor-power unanswered and that of culture's sociopolitical function within the current crisis of social reproduction unclear"<sup>8</sup>

On the theme of immaterial labor, Susan Hegeman considers the potential impact of Indigenous performers featured in a pedagogical film series of the 1960s and 1970s in "Arctic Pedagogy: Indigenous People and the MACOS Culture War" < <https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/arctic-pedagogy-indigenous-people-netsilik-inuit-macos-culture-war-hegeman/> > "Man: A Course of Study" (MACOS) was a sweeping curricular shift for public schools, funded by the National Science Foundation, that replaced a "traditional" social studies education in civics and history with "hard" social sciences like anthropology and behavioral psychology. With particular attention to struggles over the MACOS pedagogy's Netsilik Film Series, Hegeman explores how both liberals and conservatives understood the relationship between education, totalitarianism, and national and personal identity during the Cold War. Hegeman describes the steady accumulation of cultural, social, and political forces rallied against MACOS's Indigenous representations in particular, including how outrage and disgust over these representations were central to right-wing coalition building and tactical development in this period. Positioning MACOS and in particular the Netsilik Film Series as an affront to American exceptionalism, conservative politicians used these rhetorical maneuvers to obscure their material interests in extracting resources from Indigenous land, including most famously at Dziłíjiiin (Black Mesa). Finally, Hegeman explores how the Netsilik Film Series served as a powerful expression of intellectual sovereignty on the part of Inuit performers, and a counter-tactic of indigenous pedagogy inserted into US curriculum. This history of the MACOS pedagogy provides an important lens for current US struggles around "dog whistle" cultural politics—adopted first by isolated parents and education critics—associated with critical race theory.

In this issue's other article on cultural studies and Indigenous representations, Cécile Heim navigates the politics of representation across the genres of literature and television and depictions of violence in recent popular work. Heim's article "Commodifying Tragedy: Representing Violence against Native American Women in *The Cold Dish* and *Longmire*" < <https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/commodifying-tragedy-representing-violence-against-native-american-women-cold-dish-longmire-heim/>> directs us towards the ways that the logics of settler-colonialism function even and especially in so-called progressive representations of Indigenous peoples in media. By focusing on genre, tropes, and the formal or structural aspects of commodity production, Heim offers a holistic analysis of the white supremacist foundational relationship between representation and settler-colonialism. Tying the histories of settler colonialism to the formal structures of popular narratives, even the well-meaning progressive potential of the representational politics of Indigenous peoples across contemporary media, always run aground on the historical threshold of white, US settler colonialism.

Now, two full years through a pandemic that has uprooted place-based work for many, and forced even more indoors, away from public spaces, and onto screens. In these instances the connections between affect and immaterial labor practices are illuminated by the instructional work that many of us do and are still doing from rooms in our homes repurposed for instruction. In "Coronavirus Pedagogy in the Zoomscape: Pinhole Intimacy Culture Meets Conscientization," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/coronavirus-pedagogy-zoomscape-pinhole-intimacy-culture-conscientization-breen/>> Marcus Breen tightens his analytical scope around the kinds of immaterial labor that, as we become more aware of it as work, can be consciously turned into a set of pedagogical strategies and practices Breen shows that these practices when married to critical pedagogies can turn the tables, or mitigate their effects, in the context of institutions' attempts to police labor and learning in the pandemic.

Our latest forum, Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope < <https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/corona-affects-effects/>>, edited by Mattia Fumanti and Elena Zambelli, examines how the current COVID-19 pandemic intersects with other pre-existing and enduring pandemics, such as those produced by racism, capitalism, and speciesism. Contributors offer multimedia reflections on affects triggered or evoked by the current pandemic, such as rage, fear, despair, restraint, care, and hope. Coming from different parts of the globe and disciplinary approaches, authors convey the "Corona(virus) a(e)ffects" in multisensorial ways, combining written essays, poetry, videos, and photographs. In so doing, it provides a space for the expression of radical affectivities of dissent and hope that its outburst has arguably made only more visible and pressing.

As part of the forum, Yannis Kallianos and Pafsanias Karathanasis' "Public Space as Infrastructure of Care: The Affective Dynamics of Protomagias Square During the Pandemic" < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/public-space-infrastructure-care-protomagias-square-pandemic-kallianos-karathanasis/>> examines public space in Athens, Greece, which reemerged, once again, as a critical site of sociopolitical antagonism during the pandemic. Andrew Brooks and Michael Richardson turn to the affective witnessing in the wake of George Floyd's murder to argue for the flesh as affective register crucial to the building of global anti-racist solidarities in "On

Witnessing a Riot." < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/on-witnessing-a-riot-brooks-richardson/>> Suzanne Enzerink's "Feelings, Fascism, and Futures" < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/feelings-fascism-futures-enzerink/>> focuses on the affect of restraint, which emerged as a defining feature of the pandemic and became racialized, linking both domestic and international uses of restraint to preexisting structures of inequality. Irene Peano's "Within and Against Racial Segregation: Notes from Italy's Encampment Archipelago," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/within-against-racial-segregation-italys-encampment-archipelago-peano/>> examines how discourses about migrant farm workers in Italy decide upon these subjects' worthiness of attention, care, and sympathy through criminalizing, victimizing, and humanitarian registers. Lasse Mouritzen, Madeleine Kate McGowan, and Kristine Samson let go of the promises of normality, exploring various personal, academic, & aesthetic states—like temporary glimpses of a new world—in "Bewilderment, Hope, and Despair." < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/bewilderment-hope-despair-mouritzen-mcgowan-samson/>> Paulina Lanz examines twentieth-century photographs and newspaper stories of the 1918 influenza pandemic in "Cycles of Quotidian Pandemic Instances: Voice(less) Stories from 1918" < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/cycles-of-quotidian-pandemic-instances-voiceless-stories-from-1918-lanz/>> to reveal waves of history, sound, and pandemics, and pushes us to acknowledge what we have unlearned. Snežana Stanković and Linda Paganelli read the pandemic-afflicted (human) world in terms of post-human translation, speaking in images of human-spiders in the forest who sense the radical isolation of humans, in "The Green Color of Grief: Spider-Human Dreams," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/the-green-color-of-grief-spider-human-dreams-stankovic-paganelli/>> echoing Anna Tsing's call for "collaborative survival." Giulia Carabelli's "Plants, Vegetables, Lawn: Radical Solidarities in Pandemic Times" < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/plants-vegetables-lawn-radical-solidarities-pandemic-times-carabelli/>> explores the meanings of affective bonds and experiences between plants and humans, based on stories collected during social isolation. Frank Karioris' "Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic" < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/finding-joy-elegy-poetry-pandemic-karioris/>> reflects on recent literary production addressing the pandemic to elaborate new forms of elegy that understand the importance of new relational possibilities as we move towards a post-pandemic world.

Finally, in this issue we add a crucial piece to the Years in Cultural Studies timeline < <https://csalateral.org/years/>> project: 2013, when the first Eastern European international conference on cultural studies was held in Prague. This year marks for authors, Karel Šima, Ondřej Daniel, and Tomáš Kavka, the moment when influences from the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the and the regional and national histories that produced studies of popular culture across Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Yugoslavia congeal. "2013—East by Eastwest: Cultural Studies' Route to Eastern Europe" < <https://csalateral.org/section/years-in-cultural-studies/2013-east-by-eastwest-cultural-studies-route-to-eastern-europe-sima-daniel-kavka/>> provides an expansive critical and regional history of the studies of subcultures and popular culture in Eastern Europe. It explains how the influences of what was called the science of culture or "culturology" (influenced by Russian *kulturologia*) were organic to different societal



relationships which, by necessity, understood relations between culture and power differently from what the authors refer to as “Anglo-American cultural studies” and its Gramscian vocabulary which smacked of a Marxist-Leninism that Russia was moving away from for some time. The article also tracks the influence of ethnology, social and cultural anthropology, cultural sociology, media studies, literary studies, and cultural history to the development of cultural studies in several other Eastern Europe countries. Relying strongly on untranslated sources, the value of this article for our understanding of the international development of contemporary cultural studies is extraordinary.

## Notes

1. Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardy (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133. [↗](#)
2. Quoted in Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 76. [↗](#)
3. Sara Warner, “Rage Slaves: The Commodification of Affect in The Five Lesbian Brothers’ *The Secretaries*,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 23, no. 1 (2008), 23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2008.0013> < <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2008.0013>> . [↗](#)
4. Clara Jeffrey and Monika Bauerlein, “All Work and No Pay: The Great Speedup,” *Mother Jones*, June 2011, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/06/speed-up-american-workers-long-hours>. [↗](#)
5. Warner, “Rage Slaves,” 24. [↗](#)
6. See, for instance: Lexi McMenamin, “#Striketober Continues As Over 100,000 Workers Prepare to Strike,” *Politics, Teen Vogue*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-striketober> < <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-striketober>> . [↗](#)
7. Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Todd Wolfson, Brian Dolber, and Chenjerai Kumanyika, “Introduction” in *The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence*, eds. Brian Dolber, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Chenjerai Kumanyika, Todd Wolfson (New York: Routledge 2021), 4. [↗](#)
8. Sean Cashbaugh, “Back to Basics with Labor-Power: The Problem of Culture and Social Reproduction Theory,” *Lateral* 10, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.2.3> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.2.3>> . [↗](#)

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## First-Person Shooters, Tunnel Warfare, and the Racial Infrastructures of the US–Mexico Border

by Juan Llamas-Rodriguez | Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Digital networked media actively participate in the nation-state's and tech entrepreneurs' efforts to imagine and manage the borderlands. These media facilitate virtual forms of thinking about the border both by offering popular reference points for the new technology being developed (e.g. Google Maps, *Pokémon Go*, *Call of Duty*) and by providing the actual tools through which these ideas can become actionable. This article analyzes one such reference point within the first-person shooter (FPS) console game *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* (Ubisoft, 2011). Like other border-themed video games, *The Cartel* borrows on colonial tropes and ideologies by creating playable narratives that invoke the untamable frontier and position racialized subjects as Other. Through its virtual modes of representation and interaction, the game encodes the racialization processes that continue to shape popular imaginings of the border. While its digital aesthetics animate a dynamic space of possibility, the logic of the first-person shooter reins in the expansiveness of animated space by restricting it to an interactive experience of tunnel warfare, an ideological orientation to the border underground that channels the players' purposive motion into a space of direct confrontation and racial violence. Analyzing the narrative and procedural work of this ostensibly reactionary video game demonstrates how border infrastructures structure and shape specific forms of racial and colonial violence.

**KEYWORDS** media, war, border, video games, racialization, infrastructure, US–Mexico border

In June 2017, the designer of the virtual reality technology Oculus, Palmer Luckey, co-founded a defense technology company called Anduril. The company's first project was Lattice, an artificial intelligence system consisting of high-tech, low-cost sensors networked together to detect human presence at the US–Mexico border and send push alerts to notify US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents in real time. Lattice's promotional mock interfaces feature satellite images of the border terrain, animated graphics, and what looks like close-circuit video footage of people running in the desert. Upon receiving a push alert, CBP agents strap on a pair of VR goggles to see a bird's-eye view of the border by toggling between each sensor's individual streams. Describing Luckey's pitch to the US Department of Homeland Security, writer Steven Levy characterizes Lattice as a "sci-fi fantasia" that "us[es] off-the-shelf sensors and cameras, connect[s] them in a network, and make[s] something in the spirit of Google Maps and *Pokémon Go*."<sup>1</sup> The allusion to popular digital media in this description reveals much about how the borderlands are conceptualized by Silicon Valley speculators and their partnering



state agencies. Media facilitates virtual forms of thinking about the border both by offering the reference points for the new technology being developed (Google Maps, *Pokémon Go*, *Call of Duty*) and by providing the actual tools through which these ideas can become actionable.<sup>2</sup> As modes for imagining and creating, media technologies are particularly well suited to facilitate that transition between the virtual and the actual: the “spirit of Google Maps and *Pokémon Go*” quickly becomes the militaristic apparatus that targets brown bodies at the border.

In this article, what I call the “infrastructures of the border” refers to the sociotechnical systems that maintain the geopolitical boundary (checkpoints, bridges, surveillance cameras, weapons) and to the conceptual frameworks that shape popular ideas about what borders are and what they are for. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs’ references to popular digital media in the pitching and development of actual technologies for CBP agents reveals how much the physical and conceptual infrastructures of the border are intertwined. These references also implicitly suggest the racial mechanics undergirding the construction and maintenance of border infrastructures. As Daniel Nemser argues, race became thinkable in the colonial context through spatial disciplines (e.g. cartography or urban planning) and racialization took place through physical interventions in the landscape. Colonial infrastructure projects enabled the consolidation of racial categories by allowing “groupness” to emerge and by naturalizing segregation.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary times, infrastructure projects continue to naturalize segregation through physical means: the US border wall stands as one of the most vulgar examples of this. Race continues to be a question of space as much as it is a question of populations and, as the Lattice example illustrates, the infrastructures of race in the border context increasingly include digital spaces in addition to physical ones.

If digital networked media actively participate in the nation-state’s and corporations’ efforts to imagine and manage the borderlands, then these media can also help us make sense of, and devise alternatives to, the visual, conceptual, and ideological infrastructures sustaining such efforts. This article pursues such a claim by analyzing one particular infrastructure of the US–Mexico border—underground tunnels—within the first-person shooter (FPS) console game *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* (Ubisoft, 2011). *The Cartel* is the third installment in the video game series *Call of Juarez*, a riff on the popular *Call of Duty* series but set in the US–Mexico border. The game follows three rogue law enforcement agents tracking down leaders of a trafficking cartel. Although I sometimes reference other media that deploy underground tunnels similarly, a sustained interrogation of *The Cartel* will offer insight into how its digitally animated border tunnels encode the infrastructures of race that Nemser argues stretch back to colonial times. Border-themed video games often borrow on colonial tropes and ideologies by creating playable narratives that invoke the untamable frontier and position racialized subjects as Other. Through digital modes of representation and interaction, these games encode the racialization processes that continue to shape popular imaginings of the border.

An analysis of the narrative and procedural work of tunnels within an ostensibly reactionary video game demonstrates how border infrastructures structure and shape specific forms of racial and colonial violence. The argument of this article follows Tara Fickle’s claim that “the infrastructure of gaming [is] itself a raced project.”<sup>4</sup> Tracing a

symmetry between the racial logic undergirding spatialized systems of oppression and the ludic logic that presents games as games, Fickle compellingly argues that we must understand racialization as a “location-based technology that has been seamlessly automated into the interface of everyday life.”<sup>5</sup> If we understand racialization as a ludic logic, as a series of rules that encode hierarchies by limiting what some subjects can do and what others cannot, then video games like a first-person shooter pointedly illuminate the racial infrastructures of the border.<sup>6</sup> Telescopic modes of visualizing the border like those proposed by Lattice inherently position border agents in the role of active watcher and shooter while all bodies present in the borderlands (e.g. migrants, Indigenous folks) are always already targets of scrutiny and violence. Analyzing the narrative, design, and procedural elements of *The Cartel* succinctly demonstrates how digitally animated renderings and their algorithmically determined forms of interaction shape the racial infrastructures of the border.

By “infrastructures” I refer not only to the structures themselves, but also to the connections between physical substrates and conceptual frameworks. As anthropologist Brian Larkin argues, the impact of infrastructures goes beyond their technical capabilities because they “encode the dreams of individuals and societies” in such a way that social ideals and fantasies can be “transmitted and made emotionally real.”<sup>7</sup> The interrelated material and semiotic features of infrastructures means we should approach them as “generative structures,” or frameworks for building systems and environments that embody social values.<sup>8</sup> Theorizing the border tunnels of *The Cartel* in this capacious understanding of infrastructures allows us to uncover the fantasies and social values embedded in virtual representations of the borderlands.

The first two sections of the article trace the genealogies of the ideologies embedded in a border-themed game like *The Cartel*, both as a virtual medium and as representation of the border as an untamed frontier. The next two sections analyze how the game’s genre and its level design mobilize the tunnel figure to re-imagine the space of the border while simultaneously reinforcing the dominant racial infrastructures of the border. *The Cartel*’s digital animation renders underground tunnels in imaginative ways yet the game’s specific form of interactivity, i.e. how players are able and unable to traverse these animated structures, circumscribes the experience of the border underground. While digital aesthetics may animate a dynamic space of possibility, the logic of the first-person shooter reins in the expansiveness of animated space by restricting it to an interactive experience of *tunnel warfare*. As an ideological orientation to the border underground, tunnel warfare explains how the game’s rendering of the underground environment through algorithmic corridors channels the players’ purposive motion into a space of direct confrontation and racial violence. This video game’s interactivity and digital animation act as racial infrastructures of the border by “making emotionally real” the (until now) unrealistic threat of tunnel warfare. The concluding section explains that, since the game’s design makes racial confrontation the most effective form to win the game, we must understand *playing at tunnel warfare* as a form of projecting old racial hierarchies into new, untapped border spaces.

# The Politics of Virtual Media

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the founder of a virtual reality company would become interested in designing and developing media technologies for border policing. Borders are “virtual realities in the most literal sense,” argue Eszter Zimanyi and Emma Ben Ayoun, because they “project national and political imaginaries onto physical bodies.”<sup>9</sup> The virtual reality of the border refers both to the current forms of media-enabled visualizations of control and to the emergent explorations of possible border alternatives. Throughout this article, I refer to video games and their use of animation as virtual media not only because of the technical affordances of computer-generated spaces but also because of these media’s capacity to represent what has yet to be actualized.<sup>10</sup> If the virtual remains in a state of potential until given form, often through mediation, then virtual media engage in speculation, or practices that form conjectures, make estimations and projections, and look into the future so as to hypothesize. Virtual media project alternative futures by actualizing them in interactive forms. These technologies are thus not mere conduits for representing the border space; rather, they actively participate in the creation of space and in the encoding of dominant or resistant ideologies onto that space.

Interactive representations of the border hold significant sway in envisioning its features and its politics. The controversy over *Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2* (Ubisoft, 2007), for example, centered on the game’s depictions of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, as a lawless space in need of military intervention. At the time of its release, both the mayor of Juarez and the governor of Chihuahua condemned the game for promoting xenophobic ideas about Mexicans living in the border state and dissuading people from visiting the border city.<sup>11</sup> Even without referencing specific locations, games about the US–Mexico border can reinforce racist stereotypes in their playable dynamics, as in the case of *Smuggle Truck* (Owlchemy Labs, 2011).<sup>12</sup> Scholars have therefore argued that critical analysis of video games should be central to discussions of border and Latinx politics in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Because “virtual experiences are contributing ever more to the way we live and understand our real lives,” Phillip Penix-Tadsen calls for a Latin American ludology that takes seriously how players interact with the region in the virtual sphere.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of the borderlands, the frontier ideology that promises an untamed expanse in need of intervention by white settlers finds its analogue in the ideology of interactivity promised by video games. For Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins, these interactive virtual spaces are rife with colonial paradigms in that they “open new spaces for exploration, colonization, and exploitation, returning to a mythic time when there were worlds without limits and resources beyond imagining.”<sup>15</sup> If by now the borderlands have been fully occupied and exhausted by the two nation-states that lay claim to them, virtual depictions of these spaces recycle the colonial fantasy of finding the lands untouched and ripe for settler occupation. This representation of open virtual spaces dovetails with the interactive narratives afforded by video games. The connection between game space and narratives of exploration lies in “the transformation and mastery of geography—the colonization of space” since progressing through the levels of a game is quite often contiguous with progressing through its world.<sup>16</sup> Yet, as Soraya Murray argues, representations of a



landscape within games reveal “ways of seeing the landscape, *but as a representation of something that is already a representation in its own right.*”<sup>17</sup> While virtual representations in video games shape ideologies about the space depicted, their interactive form of representation already draws attention to its own constructedness. The value of critically examining how a reactionary video game constructs the borderlands is not only about identifying these representations as inaccurate but also about learning how these representations are built in the first place.

Then there is the question of play, or the strategies that players undertake within the constraints of the game design. How players interact with the space of video games has real implications for how this space comes to matter in the world. Games create “worlds with values at play,” argues Miguel Sicart.<sup>18</sup> Players engage with the spaces depicted through the rules of the game. These rules have implied values within them, particularly about which forms of action are preferred or discouraged. There are ethics involved in rule-making *and* in playing, as users choose to follow, push at, or cheat these rules. When games take up already culturally loaded spaces in their playable narratives, we must attend to how the values inherent in the rules of the game resonate with the ideologies of that space in the real world. “There is no magic circle,” Mia Consalvo reminds us,<sup>19</sup> because in-game behaviors often reflect players’ extra-game lives, revealing the porousness of the boundaries between territories of play and the lived world.

In particular, the first-person shooter game interpellates players as the sole causal force within the fictional world. The FPS’s brand of interactivity makes the player individually responsible for the decisions that affect gameplay while the game’s design already circumscribes the possibilities for action. Critically analyzing the doublethink inherent in digitally animated play sequences of tunnels offers one way to parse out how interactive media’s affordances enable particular ways of thinking about the current formation of the border and its potential alternative formations. The point is not to evaluate whether or not audiences believe that border tunnels are in fact as wide and high as depicted in digitally animated sequences. Rather, this analysis focuses on how virtual depictions of the border reveal the parallels between media-enabled forms of perception and the ideological alignments with border enforcement. If the infrastructures of the border include those physical structures and cognitive frameworks that entrench our current understanding of how divisions between states ought to be established and enforced, then animated tunnels thwart realistic expectations about the reliability and stability of such structures and frameworks. At the same time, these virtual depictions can create new spaces to repeatedly play out longstanding colonial and racial dynamics.

## Frontier Narratives and the Mexican “Other”

*The Cartel* is the only game in the *Call of Juarez* series set in contemporary times. The installment proves generative for analyzing media tropes about the border because, by virtue of its failures in design and story, it makes explicit not only the racist and colonialist tropes underpinning frontier narratives but also how these tropes take shape in the mediated depiction of space. Frontier narratives have long been a foundational fiction of

the United States as a settler-state and erstwhile colonial outpost of the European metropolis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The “myth of the frontier” first served to explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies: waging a “savage war” with the indigenous peoples of the continent established the colonists’ self-identity and racial supremacy.<sup>20</sup>

The frontier as the expansive space to articulate conflicts between civilizations has long been a trope in popular culture and media, particularly through the genre of the western. The western allowed for the strict delimitation of good guys and bad guys in moralistic narratives set within purportedly uncharted and unruly lands. Media historian Thomas Schatz argues that the significance and impact of the western as the United States’ “foundation ritual” has been most clearly and effectively articulated in cinema. Filmic depictions of limitless vistas projected “a formalized vision of the nation’s infinite possibilities” which served to “‘naturalize’ the policies of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny.”<sup>21</sup> The genre mutates to articulate various different anxieties about the nation, masculinity, and spatial control. Adding the affordance of interactivity, video games have likewise mobilized the tropes of the lawless frontier by creating virtual spaces that allow players to “play at colonization.”<sup>22</sup> Film and television neo-westerns of the mid-2000s and early 2010s drew on these tropes to tell stories about these renewed anxieties at the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>23</sup> Neo-westerns have also come to represent the US-centric anxieties about the integration of the American hemisphere as a result of economic globalization and the increased transnational migration of people and goods.<sup>24</sup> The *Call of Juarez* video game series draws on this new wave of interest in the western, connects it to the first-person shooter, and, in the process, finds resonances between the racist and colonialist tropes of both genres. *The Cartel* evidences the most pronounced examples of these resonances.

The racist elements of *The Cartel* have been well-documented by popular critics. Early in the game there is a level called “Gang Bang” where the law enforcement characters have to “incite gang violence” in a district of the game’s version of Los Angeles. In this level—and only in this level—players unlock an achievement called “Bad Guy” for killing at least forty characters. Importantly, all the non-playable characters (NPCs) that players would need to kill to unlock said achievement are black men. Another level alludes to the issue of sex trafficking around the border region by presenting it as if Mexican drug lords kidnap American white women to sell as sex slaves in Mexico. This framing falsely portrays the flow of sex trafficking as it currently occurs in the US–Mexico context, erasing the fact that most often Mexican women are kidnapped to service American clients. The level also builds on decades-old racist myths perpetuated by media about people of color conducting white slavery.<sup>25</sup> In their review of the game, the educational collective Extra Credits explains that *The Cartel* “might be the most racist game [they’ve] ever played by a major publisher.”<sup>26</sup>

Racist portrayals of Mexicans in US popular media have a long history, as detailed by the work of Charles Ramirez Berg. Stereotypes such as *el bandido*, the drug runner, and the inner-city gang member are ahistorical and decontextualized representations that, through repetition, become “part of the narrative form itself—anticipated, typical, and well nigh ‘invisible.’”<sup>27</sup> Despite repeated calls from advocacy groups for more varied portrayals,

these stereotypical depictions continue today. As Jason Ruiz demonstrates, critically acclaimed neo-westerns in cable television dramas like *Breaking Bad* present stories about white male (anti)heroes defeating Mexican villains, thereby perpetuating the “Latino threat narrative” that positions these brown subjects as inherently threatening to the body politic of the United States.<sup>28</sup> When such rhetoric then infiltrates the realm of policy, it shapes how Latinx bodies come to matter in popular discourse.<sup>29</sup>

As part of popular media, video games likewise frequently activate these stereotypes. Indeed, *The Cartel* falls within what Phillip Penix-Tadsen calls “contras games,” which “situate Latin American culture within the realm of paramilitary warfare” and whose narrative presents Latin Americans “only as the anonymous enemy *contra* the American hero.”<sup>30</sup> Analyzing the tunnel-crossing moments in the game exposes yet another iteration of these long-standing racist and colonialist tropes. Moreover, *The Cartel* mobilizes the FPS genre to set up an interactive conflict between the game’s playable antiheroes and a series of unnamed, indistinguishable Mexican NPCs. By encoding and making playable racist and colonialist tropes, this first-person shooter recasts the borderlands as a paramilitary warzone against the infiltration of brown bodies into the United States.

## Tunnel Warfare and the First-Person Shooter

The narrative and procedural work of tunnels within this reactionary video game illustrates how border infrastructures perpetuate specific forms of racial and colonial violence. In particular, *The Cartel* mediates what has been called “tunnel warfare.” As a concept popular in defense and military research, the idea of tunnel warfare recasts the potential emergence of underground border tunnels not only as elements of drug and gun trafficking but also as active sites for the undertaking of invasion and extermination efforts akin to those of a foreign-set war. Fighting within tunnels has long been an important albeit unremarked feature of modern wars.<sup>31</sup> Military historians argue that while it does not “share the glamor” of air or sea warfare, armed conflicts in tunnels have often had decisive effects in the history of modern human conflict.<sup>32</sup> The prolonged engagement in underground fronts during the Vietnam War represents a notable example in the history of the US military.<sup>33</sup> More recently, the concept of tunnel warfare recurs within defense contractor sectors interested in developing new technologies to carry out such warfare underground. Think tanks based out of the United States look particularly to the Israel Defense Forces’ attacks on Palestinian tunnels in the occupied territories and hypothesize how such actions could benefit policing efforts in US-occupied areas and across the border.<sup>34</sup> According to such research, the subterranean must become “an operational environment” and armed forces should actively prepare for future conflicts underground.<sup>35</sup> In the twenty-first-century version of tunnel warfare, war must be waged on the Global South subjects trying to use the tunnels to purportedly access Global North’s territory and resources.

To understand how tunnel warfare comes to figure the border as a lawless arena, consider another famous media text that also features a tunnel shootout, Denis Villeneuve’s thriller *Sicario* (2015). In one of the film’s iconic sequences, agents of the inter-agency task force

enter an underground border tunnel in the middle of the night. The agents disperse across what appears to be a long corridor with smaller hallways branching off. In the course of the ensuing shootout, the film's protagonist Kate (played by Emily Blunt) is almost shot from the corner of one of these hallways. Asked to stay close behind by her colleague, she instead separates from the group of agents and heads down her own path. She comes out the Mexican side of the tunnel and discovers the rogue agent Medellín (played by Benicio del Toro), who has just shot a trafficker in the head and is taking a Mexican police officer hostage. When confronted, Medellín shoots Kate twice in her bulletproof vest and leaves her convalescing while he escapes to carry out his secret mission in the south side of the border.



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Figs. 1-4. The tunnel shootout in *Sicario* allows the protagonist Kate to separate from the group, only to be punished for diverging from the warfare mentality of the rest of the agents.  
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That Kate's confrontation with Medellín and the revelation of his nefarious plan play out *in* and *through* a border tunnel is significant in a number of ways. First, it takes the dominant representation of tunnels in media as avenues for the traffic of drugs northward to the US and reverses it. Second, the sequence frames the character's moment of revelation in terms of her traversing the tunnel, as she comes out the other side to discover what has been planned throughout the film unbeknownst to her. Finally, this climactic action sequence and its resolution are also the apex for the film's reactionary politics. Throughout the film, *Sicario's* narrative centers on wearing down its idealistic female protagonist from the eager proactive agent she embodies at the beginning to the disillusioned failed operative role she assumes at the end. The film consists of a series of rogue missions,

each increasingly more violent, that put Kate and her partner Reggie in constant danger while sidelining them from the decision-making processes of the task force. The tunnel shootout briefly allows Kate to separate from the norms of the group, only to be punished for diverging from the warfare mentality of the rest of the agents. Her personal defeat functions to reinforce the worldview of her male counterparts in the task force: that the border is a dangerous place where rules of law do not apply and where the only course of action is masculinist vigilante justice.

The tunnel level in *The Cartel* likewise promotes these ideologies yet situates them within the genre of the first-person shooter game. The first-person shooter game is defined by two main characteristics: its perspective ("first-person") and its activity ("shooter"). In addition to the noticeable weapon in the foreground, the perspective of the FPS is the subjective camera, a type of point-of-view shot that "positions itself inside the skull of [the] character" and attempts to reproduce the physiology of embodied vision.<sup>36</sup> As Alexander Galloway argues, the first-person subjective perspective is "so omnipresent and so central to the grammar of the entire game that it essentially becomes coterminous with it."<sup>37</sup> As the game's central functions, the FPS's subjective perspective and shooting activity work together to personalize gameplay (figure 5). The player moves the character through a series of environments, ranging from simple room-based mazes to more complex environments. Despite varying degrees of narrative and spatial complexity, "the ultimate goal in the first-person shooter is to traverse from point A to point B, ridding the environment of the enemies which inhabit it."<sup>38</sup> The FPS shooting activity is thus not only a playable action but also a mode of perception. To kill in a first-person shooter is to inhabit its environment.

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Fig. 5. The tunnel shootout scene as rendered in the first-person shooter: the subjective point of view and the weapon in the foreground signal that moving through this environment requires shooting your way through it.

This ideological mapping onto its mode of perception in the FPS illustrates why it is a preferred genre for military training. The identification structure of the FPS sets the player as the hero and casts the non-playable characters encountered throughout as villains to be eliminated. In the *Wired* article on Andruil, Palmer Luckey claims that the "DOD has been asking for what some people describe as *Call of Duty* goggles. Like, you put on the glasses, and the headset display tells you where the good guys are, where the bad guys are, where your air support is, where you're going, where you were."<sup>39</sup> Luckey's contention that the Department of Defense wants a media technology to perform the work of casting "good guys" and "bad guys" succinctly illustrates the common appeal of both this video game genre and digital technologies for border security: the illusion that the technology itself will mediate the world around the subject and map social ideologies into interactive interfaces in a straightforward way.

In the first-person shooter, to inhabit an environment is to shoot your way through it. From the outset, the game's procedural structure casts its environments as spaces filled with dangers and enemies that must be eliminated. As Matthew Payne puts it, the first-person shooter acts as a "textual apparatus [that] locates the player as an agent of change in a universe where his or her choices are decisive plot points for a personalized war story" as well as a "cultural apparatus [that] targets political anxieties as opportunities for play and pleasure."<sup>40</sup> The game allows players to "play out" political anxieties in a manner that positions them as the main agents of change for addressing these anxieties. *Addressing*, however, becomes reduced to shooting their way out of a situation. Success is measured



in hits. Amanda Philipps argues that, because games strip away the physical and psychological challenges of shooting, the gamer's experience of shooting consists of visual acuity and well-timed reflexes multiplied by quantity of hits: "shooting to kill becomes a riskless, fast-paced, twitchy enterprise."<sup>41</sup> The first-person shooter's direct, violence-forward approach further reinforces the colonialist tropes of the frontier narrative. In *The Cartel*, this approach renders the border as an untamed space and posits shooting as the way to deal with that space.

The game then centers (unnamed) Mexicans as the stumbling blocks within the series of corridors to traverse the border through the underground. As with its "Gang Bang" level, the men of color in *The Cartel* are reduced to non-playable characters whose sole purpose is being the targets for the players' shooting. Yet, this racist figuration operates not only at the level of representation. Because of the subjective camera position of the first-person shooter, this procedural genre fulfills the ideological imperative to tell the player "where the good guys are, where the bad guys are . . . where you're going, where you were" as Luckey puts it. The game's procedural elements position unnamed Mexicans as criminals and limit players' responses to shooting them. The subjective positioning of the player within the game and the design of the playable space themselves already establish specific roles that reinforce racial and gendered hierarchies.

## Playing in Algorithmic Corridors

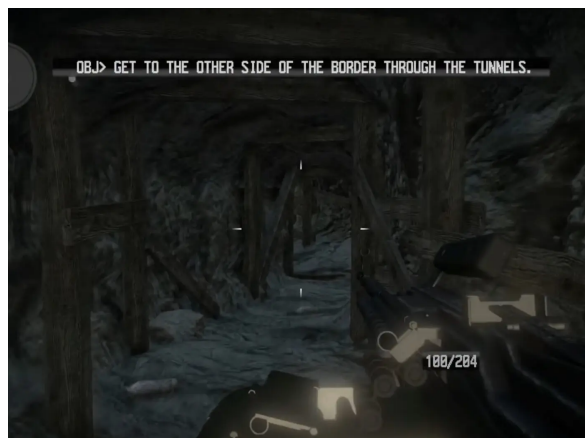
Plenty of scholars have addressed the formation of subjectivity within first-person shooter games,<sup>42</sup> but fewer have written about the role of the setting where these subjective structures take place. First-person shooter games are notorious for their use of corridors in level design. Because the principal gameplay action requires a player to advance through a level shooting and avoiding being shot at, a FPS map usually consists of a series of rooms and corridors in any number of configurations. These configurations perform wayfinding functions for players and offer tactical spaces to retreat in between rounds of shooting. FPS games may feature elaborate architectures with several different floors, sometimes with openings to see above or below. They may also include strategically placed design choices such as stairs, ramps, and poles for moving vertically between floors. The tunnel space in *The Cartel* consists of only a single floor, and while the ceiling does not always appear when players run through the level, it is implied that the lack of high galleries prevent a player from getting shot at from above. Instead, the game level relies heavily on the corridor formations, particularly a recursive series of forking corridors, to offer wayfinding and to provide players with barriers to hide behind. Rocks, wooden panels, and corridor corners allow players spaces to retreat when being shot at.

Because of this design simplification, *The Cartel* neatly illustrates the centrality of corridors to the first-person shooter as both an enabling mechanism and a restrictive feature. Corridors function as what Ian Bogost calls a "procedural figure," a unit operation that allows for a range of expressive practices.<sup>43</sup> These basic unit operations provide options for procedural forms, like a game engine or a user interface, to be applied towards a variety of goals. The assemblage of these forms creates procedural genres like the first-

person shooter. The corridor therefore acts as a figure that can be taken up in any number of ways with distinct meanings and applications across genres. How these basic figures get taken up within the genre speaks to the forms of thought that the genre potentiates and restricts. In particular, because computational media has a native ability to “represent process with process,” a procedural genre like the first-person shooter mobilizes the figure of the corridor in significantly different manners from other textual or visual media.



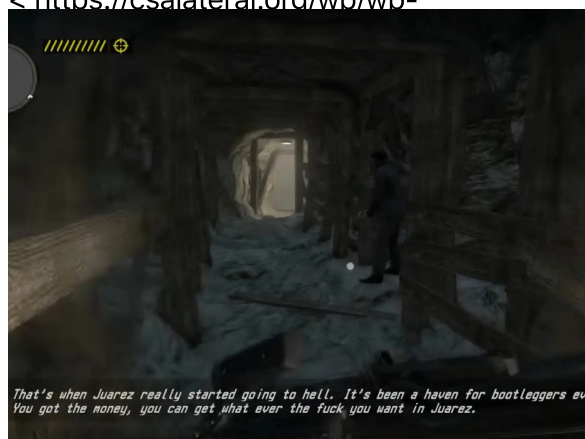
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Fig. 6-9. The tunnel environment in Call of Juarez: The Carter consists of forks, seemingly endless corridors, and inlets that allow for hiding from the shooting.  
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Corridors may allow for different expressive functions in other types of games, but in the first-person shooter they are a fundamental engine to thinking about space and purposive action. Corridority becomes a central spatial design feature that reinforces this genre’s specific identificatory perspective and enables its central activity.<sup>44</sup> The corridors set the spatial limits of how players move through the game: following linear paths and making decisions about trajectories at forks along the way. Michael Nitsche identifies five shared elements that allow individuals to create cognitive maps of fictional spaces: paths (or corridors), landmarks, edges or limits, crossroads, and districts.<sup>45</sup> Individuals could produce different cognitive maps of the same space by privileging one element over another and structuring their mental image around their privileged element. In the case of

FPS, corridors become the privileged elements for making sense of the game space. They enable the forward movement and, depending on architectural variations on their structure, facilitate or complicate strategies for attacking enemies. Corridority is therefore essential to the making sense of FPS game space both in terms of spatial recognition (the ability to navigate the game) and cognitive mapping (the understanding of the world proposed by the game).

Corridors as procedural figures in the first-person shooter also establish value judgements about how to interpret these spatial arrangements. Under the FPS logic, open spaces signify moments of vulnerability because the player could be at risk of attack from unseen foes. Game levels with multiple floors and openings between these floors dichotomize player action between hiding and advancing through the level through shooting. These open spaces present a world that requires choosing between offensive and defensive options. Players must evaluate and decide between distinct courses of action. Closed corridor spaces, in contrast, limit the opportunities for hiding, offering merely contingent and momentary instances of retreat. In turn, these closed corridor spaces not only facilitate but demand direct confrontation. Absent the possibility of a defensive position, closed corridor spaces propose attack as the only viable course of action; confrontation becomes tantamount to advancing through the level. To shoot is to move and to move is to succeed.

What is at stake in focusing on the corridority of the tunnel level as a procedural figure within *The Cartel*? As Tom Senior in *PC Gamer* notes, *The Cartel's* "[game] engine is capable of throwing out environments of notable scale, but they're always painfully linear wide corridors full of pop-up drug fiends and pop-in textures."<sup>46</sup> Other reviews of the game likewise noted the sophistication of the environment as a whole, but bemoaned the repetitiveness of the forking corridor structure for how little variety it allowed in terms of strategy. Undoubtedly, this is a failure in terms of the potential pleasures of playing the game. Little variation results in monotonous gameplay. Still, the repetitive "painfully linear wide corridors" instructively illustrate the mode of perception unique to playing through shootouts in tunnels as well as this mode's attendant ideological implications. If, as Matthew Payne argues, the cultural apparatus of the FPS transforms political anxieties into opportunities for pleasure and play, then tunnels as the site for a shootout enable specific modes of perceptual engagement with border spaces and with the characters encountered therein: neo-colonization, direct confrontation, and racist extermination.

These modes of engagement feed into a frontier rationale for interpreting underground spaces. Early in the tunnel level, the player's allies explain the history behind the tunnels:

Eddie: I've seen smuggling tunnels all up and down the border, but nothing like this one...

Kim: Some of those old Spanish forts had escape tunnels. This could be one of those...

Ben: Smugglers have been moving shit across the border ever since there was a border.

Kim: I wouldn't be surprised if the mob used this tunnel during prohibition...

Through the characters' dialogue, the game flattens a varied history of smuggling and tunnel building (fictional and nonfictional) into the same structure. The implication is that the tunnels the characters move through could stand in for all those trafficking structures that have existed throughout the history of the US–Mexico border. To be sure, the game's narrative fails to make any self-conscious connection between these illicit acts and the playable characters' own circumventing of the border through tunnels, concluding merely that as long as there has been a border, there has been smuggling. Yet, setting the game's border crossing moment within the tunnels reveals the usefulness of these infrastructures to the conceptual reorganization of the border as a lawless frontier. The tunnels' corridor structure transforms the border's linear division into an expanded space of confrontation appropriate for the first-person shooter. As previously mentioned, the game presents only unnamed Mexicans-qua-drug dealers as the stumbling blocks within the series of corridors to traverse the border through the underground. The tunnels in the game stand not only as the site for illicit activities but also as the ground where the confrontation with, and extermination of, the Mexican "Other" becomes playable and pleasurable.

The affordances of digital animation and algorithmic processing within a video game like *The Cartel* produce a virtual version of the borderlands that is both expansive and restrictive. Digital animation allows the game to create an underground border space big enough to sustain multiple shootouts. Repetitive animated renderings of tunnels as the players move through the level for a prolonged period of time create an undifferentiated space of the border underground. The algorithmic reproduction of these animated tunnels also serves to extend the time it takes players to traverse this undifferentiated space (particularly in contrast to the time it takes to watch the shootout in *Sicario*) and to reinforce the ideology of direct confrontation enabled by its corridority. Ultimately, however, these affordances mobilize almost exclusively reactionary means. The expansion of the border underground, the temporal elongation, and the procedural re-casting of movement within the first-person shooter logic serve to reinforce the lawlessness of the border region and to uphold violent self-assertion as a means to traverse the region.

## Conclusion: The Efficiency of Playing White Supremacy

Unlike other digitally animated representations of border tunnels, video games offer the opportunity for interaction, where players can select how to engage with the structures within the confines set by the game's design. As Adrienne Shaw productively explains, "analyzing texts tells us how the audience was constructed" and the meanings embedded in these texts while studying the audience "helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed."<sup>47</sup> While an audience analysis of *The Cartel* is beyond the scope of this article, I want to end by suggesting how the game's design simplification *incentivizes* players' decisions to replicate the racist infrastructures created by the tunnel level. For Christopher Patterson, games expose race not only as history or culture but also "as tactics and strategies for either winning or disrupting the order of things."<sup>48</sup> Adhering to specific "winning" strategies sometimes means embracing the dominant tensions, fears, and anxieties that shape popular notions about race. By uncritically engaging with the game's corridic structure, players of *The Cartel* could fall into its circumscribed approach to traversing the level that replicates racial hierarchies of white agents eliminating Mexican NPCs.

Consider how the walkthrough for *The Cartel* on GameFAQs, a popular game discussion site run by Game Spot, suggests traversing the tunnel level:

Follow the waypoint markers through the tunnel and you will eventually happen upon some enemies. The first group will just be a few in the hallway, which are easy enough to dispatch. The next will be a small group that has the high ground and have [*sic*] shored up behind some crates and rocks . . . . After dealing with those enemies, head through the door and head through the tunnels, following your waypoint and killing the odd enemy along the way . . . . Head toward your waypoint and suddenly a random guy will yell out that he's blowing up the tunnel. Run like hell straight forward and you'll eventually be caught [by] a rock slide and be separated from your partners. Follow your waypoint marker through a long, long corridor of debris before finding yourself with your teammates once more.<sup>49</sup>

This description encapsulates the corridor structure of the tunnel level and how this structure systematizes the FPS logic of shooting as moving. The repeated recourse to the waypoint marker is telling in this regard: whenever the level presents a fork in the tunnel corridors, the marker can help the player decide which hallway to choose. The mention of "the odd enemy along the way" and the instructions to head straight ahead repeatedly suggest that the main point of the level is running through the corridors and that the NPCs are merely obstacles in the player's movement through these corridors.














Certainly, players could choose not to follow the most efficient play strategy presented by the game. Players could perform what Espen Aarseth calls "transgressive play," a tactic that serves as "a symbolic gesture against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself."<sup>50</sup> But such transgressive play would likely be more troublesome, tiring, and time-consuming than following the straightforward strategy of embracing the game's use of corridors as avenues for racial violence. Quite literally, perpetuating the racist status quo is the path of least resistance. If racial frames emerge from the selection of play strategies as much as from the game's symbolic representation,

then the efficient way of traversing the tunnel level in *The Cartel* requires subscribing to a tunnel warfare mentality of shooting unnamed Mexican NPCs in order to cross the border. Implicit in this “efficient” play strategy also lie the twin reactionary ideologies of perceiving the borderlands as zones of conflict and of approaching border-crossing as an individualistic, violent endeavor.


















The specific imagination of underground tunnels presented in *The Cartel* results from the game’s generic conventions, its racist narrative tropes, and the specific game mechanics of the first-person shooter. Importantly, the game reveals how “tunnel warfare” can emerge as an ideological perspective even when there is no physical or material support for it. In reality, Border Patrol agents continuously reveal their hesitation to venture into a tunnel without precautionary measures for fear of finding a trafficker inside. Were they to come face-to-face with someone inside the tunnel, both parties would immediately be exposed as there would be nowhere to hide or retreat to. In contrast, the animated tunnels of *The Cartel* expand the space of the tunnel to allow for spaces to hide and shoot at enemies from, refiguring the underground space as one conducive to armed confrontation. This example of virtual media gives life and form to the idea of tunnel warfare as a future possibility for engaging with the border: a novel and imaginary rendering of the space that nonetheless replicates current forms of racist confrontation. By mobilizing the procedural elements of the first-person shooter, the game sets this confrontation as necessary for exploring the space and moving through it. Its corridority then limits the scope of possible strategies for traversing them, effectively circumscribing players’ possible actions to shooting specifically and to warfare generally. Ultimately, these animated tunnels reaffirm the ideology of tunnel warfare by opening up the possibility of such underground confrontation to occur; by implementing a strict corridor structure on the expanded underground space; and by limiting the course of action to shooting as moving.”

As military technology today makes clear,” writes Eugene Thacker, “the VR videogame interface is the ‘real world’ of navigation, combat, and warfare.”<sup>51</sup> The Lattice example described at the beginning of this article offers a clear example of this assertion. Virtual reality creators can seamlessly transition into developing militaristic technologies for border enforcement because so many of their fictional creations already present the forms of seeing and acting that render the borderlands as spaces of conflict and racial violence. That parallel is by design. As Tara Fickle argues, even purportedly innocuous games borrow racial frames for seeing and organizing the world, frames which then become actionable when racialized subjects experience violence for transgressing those norms in real, physical spaces.<sup>52</sup> Video games likewise function as inextricable infrastructures of the border insofar as these media enable speculative interactive audiovisual representations of the borderlands and encode dominant ways of interacting with that space. In the “virtual reality” of the US–Mexico border, to follow Zimanyi and Ben Ayoun, media test out alternatives that can then become physical realities. The virtual ways of seeing and interacting supported by these media have real, physical consequences when translated into continued violence to the bodies and ecologies present in the border space.












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## Back to Basics with Labor-Power: The Problem of Culture and Social Reproduction Theory

by Sean Cashbaugh | Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Ted Striphas recently called for a return to the “problem of culture” within cultural studies. This is a political as much as a methodological provocation: “culture” became an object of analysis among mid-twentieth century scholars in dialogue with Marxist accounts of ongoing political crises. Taking a cue from this past, this essay rethinks culture in relation to the ongoing crisis in social reproduction via Social Reproduction Theory (SRT). Within some Marxist feminist currents, “social reproduction” refers to the reproduction of labor-power, Marx’s term for the capacity to work sold on the market in exchange for wages. Marxist feminists have theorized such matters at length via their analyses of the practices undergirding the reproduction of labor-power. SRT is not unfamiliar to cultural studies scholars, but those engaged with it tend to explore the representation of socially reproductive practices within culture rather than the ways culture itself contributes to labor-power’s reproduction. This is unsurprising. Historically, the field has discussed labor-power in terms of its circulation rather than its reproduction, detailing culture’s role in reproducing social systems. Drawing upon Michael Denning’s “labor theory of culture,” recent work in SRT, and Marx, I argue that culture functions in a socially reproductive capacity within the logic of capitalism. In doing so, it casts cultural struggle as a form of social reproduction struggle at the intersection of labor-power’s reproduction and that of the society that requires it. This essay constructs a systematic account of culture’s socially reproductive function before using it to consider its historical expression in the current moment.

**KEYWORDS** labor, cultural studies, Marxism, culture

In his 2019 opening statement as editor of *Cultural Studies*, Ted Striphas notes a widespread feeling that cultural studies is a scholarly formation on the wane.<sup>1</sup> There is a well-established literature on the subject: arguments about its decline are frequent enough to have become their own object of analysis.<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson wrote in the early 1990s that the field’s popularity signaled a “desire” for a new Gramscian “historical bloc,” suggesting that the field’s promise was political as much as it was methodological.<sup>3</sup> This is part of the mythos surrounding cultural studies, specifically that iteration of it descending from the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, which piloted the version of interdisciplinary work that took American academics by storm in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Jameson was skeptical of this “desire,” a not uncommon sentiment in the years since. Charges that the field abandoned foundational commitments to Marxism and devolved into neoliberal affirmations of consumption appear throughout its historiography.<sup>5</sup> Such claims are cliché at this point, but not false: there was a “demarxification.” Stuart Hall said shortly

before his passing in 2014 that the field's turn away from Marxist questions signaled a "real weakness."<sup>6</sup> Many consider its left political consciousness a thing of the past, leading to calls for its "renewal" and revitalization.<sup>7</sup>

Though Striphas does not mention this particular declension narrative, it is hard not to consider given his response to the field's ostensible disappointment. He suggests that "re-energizing" the field requires a rethinking of the "basics," namely the idea of "culture" itself. As he puts it, "the problem of *culture* has shifted from a core to a peripheral concern, and it is now lacking in sustained reflection."<sup>8</sup> This is a methodological provocation with an unstated political premise. The "problem of culture" emerged in relation to debates sparked by postwar capitalism's development and political crises on the English-speaking left. "Culture" took on new political valences and posed distinct intellectual questions amidst changes in working class composition and everyday life. Figures like Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart rethought the concept in dialogue with prevailing currents in British Marxism shaped by ongoing conflicts in the 1950s: the Suez Crisis and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, most notably.<sup>9</sup> Hall and his colleagues at the CCCS did the same in response to the postwar conditions of the British working class and the crisis of Thatcherism.<sup>10</sup> The turn to "culture" as an arena of struggle was a historical imperative and political necessity.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that the work of refining culture's conventional definitions as "regimes of value; artifacts, both material and immaterial; or habits of thought, conduct, expression, and identification" cannot be an arbitrary matter.<sup>12</sup> It must be a project driven by the demands a new conjuncture makes on culture as a concept. To do this work, this essay turns to the current crisis of social reproduction and the Marxist feminist tools developed in response to it.

In the broadest sense, "social reproduction" refers to the socially necessary mental, physical, and emotional work that reproduces and maintains human life on a day-to-day basis, what some have summarized as "care work" or "people-making work."<sup>13</sup> Some Marxist feminists adopt a narrower definition, using it to refer to the reproduction of labor-power, Karl Marx's term for the capacity to labor sold as a commodity in exchange for wages. Early theorists in this tradition adopted an expansive view of the "economic," taking their cues from Marxists that theorized the creep of capitalist social relations outside "the factory" in light of their real subsumption to capital.<sup>14</sup> They investigated domestic labor's reproduction of labor-power, developing a non-reductionist account of the relationship between capitalism and gender oppression by showing how the unpaid work performed by women in the household established the conditions of possibility for the production of surplus value outside the home.<sup>15</sup> Broadly influential, their insights have led scholars to consider the socially reproductive functions of a wide array of labors and services, including healthcare, education, and other "care" fields.

Nearly fifty years of neoliberal policy have rendered the work of social reproduction increasingly difficult. The Marxist feminist tradition described above offers the most robust account of this crisis: unlike neoclassical economic or Foucauldian explanations, the Marxist approach identifies its roots in capitalism's antinomies.<sup>16</sup> This tradition centers labor, unlike other notable theories of social reproduction such as that of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>17</sup> Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser write, "capitalist society harbors a social-reproductive contradiction: a tendency to commandeer for capital's benefit as much

‘free’ reproductive labor as possible, without any concern for its replenishment.”<sup>18</sup> In failing to replenish labor-power, it fails to ensure production, prompting systemic crisis.<sup>19</sup> While the state managed these contradictions during the height of Fordism in the global north, neoliberalism’s erosion of the welfare state has contributed to mass precarity.<sup>20</sup> In low-income nations of the global south such processes have unfolded equally disastrously, shaped by the pressures of imperialist super-exploitation and the accompanying devastation of working class communities.<sup>21</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the crisis on both fronts.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the terrain of social reproduction has become a heightened terrain of political conflict, with those in frequently feminized care professions—teachers and nurses, for example—engaged in class struggle.<sup>23</sup>

This crisis and the response to it has led SRT to become increasingly prominent on the English-speaking Left.<sup>24</sup> Leftist scholars working in multiple fields have turned to it to make sense of the current moment.<sup>25</sup> Cultural studies can do likewise: SRT provides an opportunity to “re-energize” the field’s intellectual and political commitments by rethinking “culture” in terms adequate to the crisis named above. Contemporary scholars attuned to matters of culture and social reproduction tend to explore the content of cultural works and practices, examining representations of socially reproductive labor, focusing on the persistence of capitalism’s social reproduction system.<sup>26</sup> This is valuable, but does not address the ways that culture contributes to the reproduction of labor-power itself.<sup>27</sup> Such works remain focused on what Barbara Laslett and Joanna Brenner describe as *societal* rather than *social* reproduction.<sup>28</sup> This is unsurprising: cultural studies scholars rarely consider labor-power as anything other than a fully formed commodity ready for sale in the market, examining it from the standpoint of its circulation rather than its production. This leaves the question of culture’s relation to labor-power unanswered and that of culture’s sociopolitical function within the current crisis of social reproduction unclear.

Though SRT has only minimally engaged with cultural matters, its insights are directly relevant to them. I argue that “culture” possesses a *socially* reproductive function complementary to its *societally* reproductive function. It is axiomatic within the field that culture is a material force: the ideological terrain only exists in and through concrete practices.<sup>29</sup> When read in the context of SRT’s view of the economic, the relationship between these practices and labor-power becomes apparent. Kylie Jarrett, Eric Drott, and Nathan Kalman-Lamb have made similar claims about the “people-making work” of individual cultural forms—social media, music, and sport, respectively—but a more general theorization of such matters is necessary given the peripheral standing of “the problem of culture” and the centrality of culture to capitalism today.<sup>30</sup> A systematic account at a high level of abstraction that tackles “culture” in relation to labor-power can clarify its social reproductive function within capitalism as a social totality, revealing tendencies and contradictions that can later be considered historically.<sup>31</sup> Michael Denning’s “labor theory of culture” provides a generative starting point for this project: he links culture and labor-power in terms consistent with those of SRT. Building on his work, I suggest that culture stands as one of the many determinants of labor-power’s reproduction, as one of the constitutive components of the labor process and of that process’s conditions of possibility. This abstract model reveals the phenomena studied by Jarrett, Drott, and Kalman-Lamb as historical expressions of capitalism’s social reproductive logic, pointing

towards the particular relationship neoliberal capitalism posits between labor-power and culture.

My claims about the socially reproductive function of culture are neither transhistorical nor functionalist. It is imminent to capitalism, a consequence of the forms of labor it compels and the needs it produces. I do not offer a general theory of culture relevant to all contexts, only those dominated by the capitalist mode of production. My argument retains another axiom of cultural studies, namely the idea that culture remains a contested terrain. I highlight the often-contradictory connection between social and societal reproduction as a site of political intervention. This essay links cultural struggles to social reproductive struggles, suggesting that the former can function as forms of the latter. Fights over meaning can be thought of in the same terms as fights over sustenance and care.

To make this argument, I first explicate SRT by examining its approach to labor-power and the economic by turning to Maria Dalla Costa and Selma James's *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1975) and Bhattacharya's conception of a wage labor circuit in the context of larger debates within Marxism about reproduction. This background frames the following section, which details the ways cultural studies scholars have traditionally focused on labor-power's circulation rather than its reproduction, centering "societal" rather than "social" reproduction. Next, I put Denning's labor theory of culture into conversation with contemporary Marxist feminist work in SRT and Marx's own writings on labor to construct a systematic account of culture's socially reproductive function within capitalism, detailing at a high level of abstraction the synthesis and simultaneity of social and societal reproduction and the possibilities of political contestation contained therein. Historical accounts complementary to this systematic account appear in the following section.

## Reproducing Labor-Power in the Integrated Totality

If Marx aimed to demystify the "hidden abode" of production that bourgeois political economists ignored in their fetishization of the market, early Marxist feminist theorists of social reproduction aimed to peer "behind" that hidden abode to develop Marx's incomplete account of labor-power.<sup>32</sup> He minimally detailed its reproduction, suggesting only that it requires "a certain quantity of the means of subsistence."<sup>33</sup> Theorists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici, Lise Vogel, and Leopoldina Fortunati considered how unpaid labor typically performed by women in the "domestic" sphere—cooking, cleaning, and childrearing, for instance—transformed those "means of subsistence" into labor-power, thus making its exchange and the realization of surplus-value possible: without such labors, men could not earn a wage. Their intervention revealed a unity obscured by bourgeois distinctions between the economic workplace and non-economic home.

A view of capitalism as an irreducibly complex totality undergirds this intervention. SRT views the social relations constitutive of the mode of production as extending throughout

everyday life: the economic is an expansive category in this theoretical context. Dalla Costa and James described this in 1972:

The community therefore is not an area of freedom and leisure auxiliary to the factory, where by chance there happen to be women who are degraded as the personal servants of men. The community is the other half of capitalist organization, the other area of hidden capitalist exploitation, the other, hidden, source of surplus labor. It becomes increasingly regimented like a factory, what Mariarosa calls a social factory, where the costs and nature of transport, housing, medical care, education, police, are all points of struggle. And this social factory has as its pivot the women in the home producing labor power as a commodity, and her struggle not to.<sup>34</sup>

The term “social factory” originated with Mario Tronti, who argued in 1962 that capitalism’s postwar development rendered everyday life a functionary of traditional factory production, presaging later arguments by Antonio Negri regarding the “total subsumption of society” by capital.<sup>35</sup> Dalla Costa and James do not position “community” institutions as epiphenomenal to the economic or as reflections of a narrowly defined economic sphere, but as sites of social activity that exist in dialectical relation to processes of exploitation at the site of commodity production. They argued that this meant domestic reproductive labor directly produced surplus value.<sup>36</sup> Recent work persuasively challenges such claims, as well as the autonomist roots signaled by the above references to Tronti and Negri, by showing how reproductive labors indirectly relate to the production of value by waged labor, a function of the contingent relation between concrete reproductive activities and the market.<sup>37</sup> Claims about the value-productive nature of reproductive labor make political sense as a means of validating feminized (read: historically ignored) activities, but as Maya Gonzalez has argued, reproductive activities provide a necessary precondition for capital accumulation whether or not they produce value.<sup>38</sup>

Dalla Costa and James’s response to Marxism’s silence on labor-power’s reproduction was a significant intervention in Marxist theories of reproduction. Analyzing the specific experiences of women cultivated a stronger portrait of what SRT calls capitalism’s integrated totality.<sup>39</sup> Within Marxism, reproduction typically refers to the reproduction of capitalist society. This was Marx’s primary concern in volumes one and two of *Capital*, which he detailed from the perspectives of capital’s production and circulation, respectively. He discussed labor-power only insofar as it contributed to capital’s valorization, taking the capitalist system’s reproduction as his object of analysis rather than the reproduction of the workers within it, a distinction Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner describe as that between “societal” and “social reproduction.”<sup>40</sup> Later work on reproduction remained within Marx’s paradigm. Consider, for instance, the Regulation School initiated by Michel Aglietta and adopted by heavily-cited figures like David Harvey.<sup>41</sup> Aglietta aimed to explain capitalist society’s reproduction vis-à-vis the ways legal, political, and cultural institutions harmonized production and consumption.<sup>42</sup> Labor-power featured prominently in this framework, but primarily as a circulating commodity: the aforementioned institutions mobilized and assured labor-power’s movement, but did not generate it.<sup>43</sup> A societal-specific analysis, however, confronts limits: social and societal reproduction are entwined and reinforce each other; absent one, the other breaks down.<sup>44</sup>



This relationship undergirds capitalist society's aforementioned "social-reproductive contradiction."

Bhattacharya's understanding of labor-power's reproduction as a circuit complementary to that which reproduces capital schematizes the relationship between social and societal reproduction. In Marx's formulation, industrial capital valorizes through the following circuit:  $M - C(M_p, L_p) \dots P \dots C' - M'$ .<sup>45</sup> Money (M) is exchanged for commodities (C) that are produced via the coming together of the means of production with labor-power. These commodities move through a production process (P) to create commodity-capital (C') that is used to generate profit (M').<sup>46</sup> This process unfolds in the context of the total social capital, the aggregate of individual capitals, moving through what Marx calls "expanded reproduction" in service of capital accumulation, shaping society as a whole.<sup>47</sup> Capitalists, however, do not produce labor-power—that happens in the "community"—meaning labor-power possesses its own reproductive circuit entwined with Marx's general circuit.<sup>48</sup> Bhattacharya conceptualizes it thusly:  $M - A_c - P - L_p - M$ .<sup>49</sup> In this "process of production of self for the worker or a process of self-transformation," workers exchange money (M) for articles of consumption ( $A_c$ ), which they consume in a production process (P) that generates labor-power ( $L_p$ ) later sold to capitalists for money (M) in the form of wages.<sup>50</sup> Without this circuit, capital cannot valorize: it depends on labor-power. Labor-power's removal, intentional or otherwise, disrupts production and accumulation.

The relationship between social and societal reproduction thereby marks a site of political intervention as much as it does a crisis animating contradiction. It positions political struggles seemingly disconnected from the processes of production—such as those of race, gender, and sexuality—as forms of class struggle insofar as they compel changes to the social organization of labor-power's reproduction which drive changes in labor and valorization processes. In comprehending the whole, SRT explores how, in Ferguson and David McNally's words, the "messy, complex, set of lived relations carried out by differently gendered, sexualized, racialized human beings" function within capitalism.<sup>51</sup> Such modes of oppression, a list to which we could add any number of others, are "integral to and determinant of . . . actual processes of capitalist dispossession and accumulation," meaning struggles against them are always "potentially anti-capitalist in essence."<sup>52</sup> Politics organized around or in response to racial or gender-based oppression, for instance, maintain their specificity without effacing their political economic dimensions.<sup>53</sup>

Hence many topics are now viewed in terms of social reproduction. As Ferguson, Genevieve LeBaron, Angela Dimitrakaki, and Sara R. Farris write, "There is plenty of evidence . . . that the social reproduction of labour involves social relations beyond the gendered and household relations that have been the conventional focus of Marxist Feminism in general and [Social Reproduction Feminism]."<sup>54</sup> A range of activities in and outside the household facilitate the movement from  $A_c$  to P, including healthcare, education, care of the elderly or infirm, the construction of sexuality, pension funds, microcredit schemes, and education.<sup>55</sup> Such activities occur in a range of sites, including labor camps and dormitories, as Lise Vogel suggests.<sup>56</sup> Others have expanded SRT's political focus by considering its relation to decolonial politics.<sup>57</sup> Culture can be situated alongside labor-power in this framework.

# Labor-Power in Cultural Studies

Laslett and Brenner's distinction between "societal reproduction" and "social reproduction" clarifies the ways cultural studies scholars have engaged with labor-power. The field has largely engaged with culture and labor-power in terms of the former, keeping it within the domain of Marx's circuit of industrial capital and reiterating Marxism's traditional understanding of reproduction. A turn to the collective work and legacy of CCCS via Stuart Hall's 1983 lectures at the "Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture: Limits, Frontiers, and Boundaries" conference demonstrates the centrality of societal reproduction to the cultural studies project.<sup>58</sup> Pivotal to the field's popularization, they centered societal reproduction insofar as the problematic of the base and superstructure was a primary conceptual touchstone. The base/superstructure problematic is, after all, a reproductive schema.

For Hall, the relationship between the economic (base) and ostensibly non-economic (superstructure) "defined and framed the concerns of Cultural Studies."<sup>59</sup> This starting point privileges the relations constitutive of a given social formation at a macro-level. His rejection of the "strong determinist position" that saw superstructural forms like culture as mere expressions of the base was an argument for a multi-directional conception of the relationship between base and superstructure—that is, for a more nuanced conception of societal reproduction.<sup>60</sup> This is evident in Hall's engagement with Althusser's conception of ideology and Gramsci's view of hegemony. Hall saw his turn to the latter as the embrace of a less functionalist framework for understanding the reproduction of social relations. He writes, "[Althusser's conception of] ideology does not therefore only have the function of 'reproducing the social relations of production.' Ideology also sets limits to the degree to which a society can easily, smoothly, and functionally reproduce itself."<sup>61</sup> His Gramscian turn emphasized the struggle contained within these processes in contexts allegedly epiphenomenal to economic concerns, namely culture and the institutions that generated it, but his focus remains society's relations of production.<sup>62</sup>

Hall's concern with culture's mediation of societal reproduction treats labor-power as an already-formed commodity primed to move through the labor process in service of capital's valorization. The social relations of production remain tied to the traditional site of commodity production. This is a holdover from Althusser. He investigated ideology and labor-power's reproduction in the same terms, focusing on the former as one of the preconditions of the latter's movement through the production process. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," he discusses labor-power's value as Marx does in terms of wages used to purchase biological necessities, as well as acquired skills deployed in the labor process. He argues that dominant ideology as expressed and enacted within various ideological state apparatuses, including culture, subjects this productive force to the rule of the dominant class, which in turn ensures that it produces surplus value.<sup>63</sup> Ideology facilitates each relation of exchange and production within Marx's general circuit of capital. Though Hall troubled the notion that this would happen automatically, he took labor-power's presence within this circuit for granted. The concept rarely appears in his lectures except in terms of its role within extant systems of signification that are sites of struggle.<sup>64</sup> While Hall's Gramscian turn let him argue that "[cultural forms] create the possibility of

new subjectivities, but they do not themselves guarantee their progressive or reactionary content," he still presumes the presence of an individual possessing the capacity to labor that said subjectivity either does or does not put into motion.<sup>65</sup>

These are not criticisms of Hall. He was grappling with a different set of political and intellectual questions. Nonetheless, his work demonstrates a tendency within CCCS to emphasize societal reproduction that the field has reproduced since.<sup>66</sup> There were notable exceptions.<sup>67</sup> Hall and his co-authors engaged directly with Dalla Costa and James in *Policing the Crisis* (1978) to suggest that their framework offered a potentially useful means of understanding the forms class struggle took among the black working class, but this line of thinking is not substantively developed.<sup>68</sup> The Women's Studies Group and the Political Economy of Women Group at CCCS engaged with the same figures and produced a variety of works in response to debates about the nature of domestic labor.<sup>69</sup> Several essays in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1970s Britain* (1982) made similar moves with an eye towards race and the domestic labors of social reproduction.<sup>70</sup> Later works, however, tended to take the path charted in Hall's lectures. Marxist studies of leisure such as those by Chris Rojek addressed the relationship between leisure and labor-power, but did not go beyond Marx's own limited account of its reproduction.<sup>71</sup> Labor-power never appears in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson's *Cultural Studies* (1992), an influential volume in the United States that, as Paul Smith put it, "served to lay out the ideology and define the ethos of the then burgeoning field."<sup>72</sup> This is unsurprising. Charges that the field devalued, ignored, or abandoned Marxist considerations of the economic recur throughout its history.<sup>73</sup> Janice Peck, for instance, has argued that Hall's significant reevaluations of superstructural phenomena left the base (which includes labor-power) analytically undisturbed.<sup>74</sup> Toby Miller, Christian Fuchs, and Denning have all suggested that the field neglects labor.<sup>75</sup> Even works committed to reinvigorating the field's leftist political commitments vis-à-vis a grounding in political economy do not engage with labor-power's reproduction.<sup>76</sup> Such works often reiterate Hall's focus on the ideological factors facilitating labor-power's circulation rather than its material reproduction.<sup>77</sup>

## Culture and Labor-Power's Reproduction

Denning's "labor theory of culture" is a notable exception to the above-described tendency to begin and end with labor-power's circulation.<sup>78</sup> His work here has been a frequent point of reference for scholars investigating the labor history of the cultural industries, but it also provides a valuable starting point for a general theory of culture's socially reproductive functions.<sup>79</sup> The link it posits between culture and labor-power can be rethought in terms drawn from SRT. My argument here is abstract, concerning categories of the capitalist mode of production in a systematic sense rather than their historical expression, a consideration of which appears in the following section. As Hall put it, "one has to cut into the thick texture of social life and historical experience with clearly formulated concepts and abstractions," the latter of which precedes the former.<sup>80</sup> Such an approach clarifies culture's role in Bhattacharya's wage labor circuit, showing that it functions logically within capitalism's integrated totality.

Denning begins with culture's relation to work in general, providing an initial framework for thinking through the reproductive relationship between culture and labor-power. Building upon Harry Braverman's insistence on the fundamental unity of mental and manual labor, Denning insists that "work and culture are synonyms": as transformative activities, both are "purposive, conscious, and directed by conceptual thought."<sup>81</sup> The production of "regimes of value; artifacts, both material and immaterial; or habits of thought, conduct, expression, and identification," as Striphas defined "culture," are concrete activities dependent on the full-range of human faculties.<sup>82</sup> The same should be said of challenges to said regimes, the repurposing of said artifacts, and the revision of any "habits of thought, conduct, expression, and identification." While separated spatially insofar as cultural activity often takes place outside the workplace, this is the historical form of appearance of a theoretical and operational unity, a manifestation of the bourgeois mystification of the "economic" and "non-economic" akin to that between home and the workplace.

The collapse of the distinction between work and culture is a reminder that the labors of culture are not unique. The determinants of labor generally apply here. This means that prevailing regimes of gender, race, and sexuality influence them. These modes of oppression cut across the many spheres in which individuals and groups enact the labors of culture, influencing how and where they occur, who can perform them, and how society appreciates them, monetarily or otherwise. Such labors function differently with respect to production depending on their context: some cultural activity is value-productive and others not. In most cases, the substances of culture are commodities produced according to capital's industrial logic: workers sell their labor-power within the cultural industries and produce films, books, records, and the like in accordance with the prevailing relations of production; those commodities circulate on the market.<sup>83</sup> As Denning notes, a labor theory of culture draws attention to the labor process and the valorization process.<sup>84</sup> However, the labors of culture occur in different spheres. The spatial and conceptual distinction between labor and culture is a mystification, but one that has material affects; that distinction manifests historically. Informal acts of cultural production—those creative acts of everyday production, transformation, and meaning-making—usually occur outside sites of commodity production: in the household, in public spaces of consumption, and others. While individuals rarely sell their labor-power or produce value in such contexts, they are nonetheless engaged in purposive transformative activity under conditions shaped by capitalist social relations and often with materials produced as commodities. Here, they bear an indirect relation to the market, meaning these labors operate differently: they have different uses and do not necessarily circulate with exchange-value.<sup>85</sup> Much like feminized domestic labor, this is likely why culture has not been considered work.

Denning suggests that these labors are reproductive. As he notes, commodities themselves are sensuous, even extra-sensuous objects.<sup>86</sup> In thinking through culture in relation to and as work, he grounds it in bodies and minds, in human sensory experience, capturing culture's significance beyond its ideological functions, namely the production of physical and mental pleasures through the creative use of cultural forms.<sup>87</sup> Cultural forms satisfy needs in everyday life, responding to human sensorial desire rooted in the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals.<sup>88</sup> This is their primary use-value. They are "articles of consumption" put to use within a productive process, above

conceptualized as the labors of culture, that generates labor-power.<sup>89</sup> This is why he can refer to cultural objects as “means of subsistence of mobile and global workers” and claim that “culture is the labor which produces labor power.”<sup>90</sup> Elaborating, he states,

Culture is a name for that habitus that forms, subjects, disciplines, entertains, and qualifies labor power. In it lies the very resistance to becoming labor power. It is the contradictory realm of work in the shadow of value, the unpaid and “unproductive” labor of the household and what autonomous Marxists called “the social factory”; but it is also the contradictory realm of the arts of daily life, of what Marx called the “pleasures of the laborer,” the “social needs and social pleasures” that are called forth by the “rapid growth of productive capital.”<sup>91</sup>

His invocation of the “social factory” and domestic labor suggests that Denning is using “culture” in the same sense that Dalla Costa and James used “community”: to denote the “other half of capitalist organization” that makes the production of surplus-value possible.<sup>92</sup> This space is where the creative transformation of cultural forms unfolds.<sup>93</sup> Here, the work of culture does not simply mobilize labor-power in particular ways, but also contributes to its reproduction as a commodity via the individual and/or collective engagement with its sensuous qualities that occur alongside and through processes of symbolic creation or ideological negotiation. This occurs prior to labor-power’s circulation. In other words, there is more at stake in the labors of culture than ideology: they help sustain that which is necessary to survive under capitalism.

A turn to Marx’s writings on labor-power, value, and living labor clarifies the socially reproductive function of cultural activity. Though he does not adequately theorize labor-power’s reproduction, Marx does explore its value in a manner consistent with the dynamics sketched above. He defines labor-power as “The aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind,” with its value determined by that of “the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner.”<sup>94</sup> These “means of subsistence” must sustain the worker in their “normal state as a working individual.”<sup>95</sup> This includes food, shelter, and housing, as well as a “historical and moral element.”<sup>96</sup> Marx writes,

the number and extent of [a worker’s] so-called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves products of history, and depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilization attained by a country; in particular they depend on the conditions in which and consequently on the habits and expectations with which, the class of free workers has been formed.<sup>97</sup>

Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho argue that these “historical and moral elements” refer to those varied and differentiated phenomena constitutive of social relations and norms.<sup>98</sup> Marx affirms this in *Capital*’s second volume. In his discussion of the working class’s “necessary means of consumption” in the context of simple reproduction, he writes, “it is immaterial whether a product such as tobacco, for example, is from the physiological point of view a necessary and means of consumption or not; it suffices that it is such a means of consumption by custom.”<sup>99</sup> Cultural forms must be included in this framework given their

saturation of everyday life.<sup>100</sup> One cannot consider the “living personality” and “normal state” of individuals within the capitalist system absent the forms of meaning-making expressed in, by, and through cultural objects that are sensuously consumed, realizing their use-value insofar as they satisfy particular physical, mental, and emotional needs, even if only by “custom.”<sup>101</sup> This explains why Marx included cultural forms like “journals” and “books” alongside housing, foodstuffs, and educational expenses as “necessaries” in the 1880 questionnaire he developed to understand the lives and habits of the French working class: they were necessary for labor-power’s reproduction.<sup>102</sup>

Marx’s conception of the toll of the labor process drives this point home. Labor-power describes capacity to labor, not labor itself.<sup>103</sup> Marx calls this activity “living labor,” which he conceptualizes in terms consistent with his discussion of labor-power’s value. He defines it as the expenditure of “a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, etc.” which “have to be replaced.”<sup>104</sup> This expenditure depletes one’s “vital forces,” a term Marx uses in both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* to name the reservoir of physical and mental energies the concrete exercise of labor-power depletes.<sup>105</sup> “Vital forces” are what, in Marx’s famous metaphor, the vampire of capital sucks, transforming living labor into the dead labor that is capital.<sup>106</sup> As he puts it in his writings on the working day:

Within the 24 hours of the natural day a man can only expend a certain quantity of his vital force. Similarly, a horse can work regularly for only 8 hours a day. During part of the day the vital force must rest, sleep; during another part the man has to satisfy other physical needs, to feed, wash and clothe himself. Besides these purely physical limitations, the extension of the working day encounters moral obstacles. The worker needs time in which to satisfy his intellectual and social requirements, and the extent and the number of these requirements is conditioned by the general level of civilization.<sup>107</sup>

Once again, Marx identifies “moral” elements in relation to labor, clarifying them as “intellectual and social requirements” and as “needs” shaped by “civilization,” descriptions that, as suggested above, can be understood in cultural terms.<sup>108</sup> Marx invokes them as limiting factors on the physical and temporal amount of concrete labor a worker can perform with their body and mind: they determine how much their “muscle, nerve, brain, etc.” can take within the labor process.<sup>109</sup> If “journals” and “books” are “necessaries” in relation to labor-power’s value, here they are constituted as such in relation to the living labor that generates that surplus-value at the point of production.

Including cultural forms within the “historical” and “moral” determinants of labor-power as “articles of consumption” points to the historical specificity of culture’s socially reproductive function. In the passage quoted above, Marx notes that a worker’s “intellectual and social requirements” are dependent upon “the general level of civilization.”<sup>110</sup> They are expressions of “habits” and “expectations.”<sup>111</sup> As such, they are constructions. Denning alludes to this via his invocation of Marx’s *Wage-Labor and Capital*: “Rapid growth of productive capital calls forth just as rapid a growth of wealth, of luxury, of social needs and social pleasures.”<sup>112</sup> “Needs” are not static, but evolve and proliferate alongside the productive forces of society.<sup>113</sup> While the fact that meaning is made, objects creatively transformed, and sociality engendered may be transhistorical, their relationship

to labor-power is specific to social relations dominated by the regime of wage labor. Culture's socially reproductive function is not imminent to a given cultural form, but dependent upon social relations that generate "social needs" "culture" responds to. Marx could suggest that "journals" and "books" reconstituted workers' "vital forces" because the nineteenth century saw their production as "culture," a concept held as external and antithetical to the alienating drudgery of labor and violence of the market.<sup>114</sup> Denning sutures this distinction, but it remains a real abstraction. That is, an abstraction that "exists in the world as an object with social objectivity to which all must bow."<sup>115</sup>

The connection Marx draws between the needs of individual workers and the state of society suggests a connection between culture's role in social and societal reproduction. As noted earlier, culture's role in the production of the capitalist system is well-established. These modes of societal reproduction have social reproductive counterparts. First, if cultural forms are commodities, then their consumption in that capacity reproduces capitalist society, at least on some level, regardless of how they are interpreted, insofar as it continues the circulation of value.<sup>116</sup> In satisfying "social needs and social pleasures," cultural activity contributes to labor-power's reproduction and thus workers' ability to move through Bhattacharya's wage labor circuit, which itself contributes to society's reproduction: consuming cultural commodities reproduces capitalism and the use of those commodities helps generate the labor-power on which capitalism depends. Second, culture also functions ideologically, legitimating and/or limiting the reproduction of the relations of production undergirding capitalist society. This ideological component contributes to labor-power's reproduction insofar as ideology has emotional, psychological, and physical components that shape what Marx calls a worker's "normal state."<sup>117</sup> The production of one's capacities as labor-power is itself a material and ideological project shaped by the way capitalist society makes wage labor a necessary precondition for survival. Hence Denning's claim that, "Culture is a name for that habitus that forms, subjects, disciplines, entertains, and qualifies labor power."<sup>118</sup>

The relationships posited above might appear functionalist.<sup>119</sup> For instance, they suggest that culture reproduces labor-power regardless of its ideological content: societally affirming and challenging cultural activities perform the same emotional, psychological, and physical function in relation to labor-power. This may be the case at times, but the links above are by no means fixed: they denote sites of possible contradiction that serve as "points of struggle," as Dalla Costa and James would have it. If culture mediates the social relations and norms constitutive of the "historical" and "moral" determinants of labor-power, that includes the conflicts endemic to the concept. Culture does not cease being a contested terrain when viewed in social reproductive terms. Alternative interpretations of Marx's conception of "historical and moral elements" are instructive here. Contra Fine and Saad-Filho's read of this phrase, some argue it refers to class struggle.<sup>120</sup> There is no reason to separate these interpretations. As the cultural studies tradition exemplified by Hall demonstrates, social norms are sites of conflict between dominant and subordinate classes crucial to the construction and contestation of a hegemonic bloc, part-and-parcel of a Gramscian "war of position."<sup>121</sup> The meanings and affects embedded in culture that contribute to labor-power's reproduction may reinscribe the relations of production in all the senses noted in the previous paragraph, but those meanings, affects, and the benefits thereof might also challenge the regime that necessitates wage labor in the first place. The

wage labor circuit can incubate disruptions in the circuit of capital's reproduction. The need to socially reproduce oneself can undermine capitalist society's need to reproduce itself, effectively inverting the social reproductive contradiction endemic to capitalist society.

Reassessing conventional understandings of cultural politics in light of culture's socially reproductive function illustrates these contradictory dynamics. Consider demands for cultural representation. Demands by marginalized people for affirmative acknowledgment as human beings within the culture industries and society writ large, what Fraser has characterized as the politics of recognition, could be understood as demands for the materials they need to reproduce themselves and live within a violently racist and patriarchal social order that excludes and exploits them.<sup>122</sup> Such demands are more akin to those for adequate healthcare or housing rather than the articulation of a political program. They reinscribe the societal order as demands made within capitalist relationships, but the same could be said of demands for access to healthier options in food deserts. Like those "necessaries," they provide the resources to go to work, but also the resources to contest the order that compels them to do so: politics demands mental, emotional, and physical energy the same way wage labor does. The materiality of cultural struggle extends beyond the fact of its existence as a concrete practice: it is material in the sense that it is a struggle over sustenance. In this way, a cultural demand oriented towards the reproduction of labor-power helps create the conditions necessary for challenging society writ large.

The same dynamics unfold when we consider demands for access to cultural forms, specifically in terms of the time and ability to consume and produce culture. Consider struggles to shorten the workday, which challenge the production of absolute surplus value by decreasing the duration of exploitive work.<sup>123</sup> For Marx, the extended working day robbed workers of "time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfillment of social functions, for social intercourse, for the free play of the vital forces of his body and mind, [and] even the rest time of Sunday."<sup>124</sup> In short, it robs workers of the time and opportunity for cultural activity. In this light, the third clause in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American labor movement demand of "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will" is a demand for culture that implicitly recognizes its necessity to labor-power.<sup>125</sup> To demand time "for what we will" is to demand time for self-transformation in everyday life in terms not directly dictated by capital: time "for the free play of the vital forces of his body and mind."<sup>126</sup> Contemporary workers in China have made the same connection, including "leisure time" alongside other material necessities in agitational literature, positing it as essential to labor-power's reproduction.<sup>127</sup> The desire for such time requires changes elsewhere: a shorter working day will, from capital's point of view, require a restructured production process.

In the examples above, cultural struggle is an expression of social reproductive struggle, meaning we can consider it a form of class struggle. It is not an adjunct to it, an autonomous fight parallel to that over political economy. That is not to say that cultural struggle is equivalent to other forms or expressions of class struggle, only that it functions as such within capitalism's integrated totality and bears anti-capitalist potential. This underpins Denning's claim that "in [culture] lies the very resistance to becoming labor



power.”<sup>128</sup> He echoes Marx here, who suggests that it is in “ideological forms” that workers “become conscious” of contradictions and transformations in political-economy and “fight it out.”<sup>129</sup> Denning’s injunction deepens Marx’s position. It suggests that it is in “ideological forms” that workers can affect contradictions and transformations in political-economy insofar as fights for, in, and around them disrupt the circuit of wage labor’s reproduction ( $M - A_c - P - L_p - M$ ) which in turn disrupts that of industrial capital ( $M - C(M_p, L_p) \dots P \dots C' - M'$ ). This hinges on the centrality of labor-power to the smooth operation of the system. Capital depends upon it. Capitalists view workers only in terms of it. Marx notes that the drive to extend the working day reveals this truth: for the capitalist, “the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that there all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital.”<sup>130</sup> The labors of culture can undermine this perspective. In the examples considered in the previous two paragraphs, the raw materials for the production of oneself are at stake. Fights over sustenance and time can refigure conditions that demand the production of the need for labor-power, creating the conditions for the production of oneself otherwise.

## Culture and Neoliberal Crises of Care

The picture painted in the previous section is incomplete. I have largely spoken of culture, cultural forms, and cultural works in the abstract, avoiding more concrete examples like working class culture, television, and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* as much as possible. As the Endnotes Collective has argued, both systematic and historical approaches are necessary: the former helps articulate the dynamics of capital’s social totality while the latter “pour into and disrupt the identity” of that totality.<sup>131</sup> However, taken alone they only offer partial portraits. Much changes in the move from the idea of culture to cultural form and to a specific text. Arguably, the tradition of cultural studies inaugurated by the CCCS emerged via the upward movement from the abstract to the concrete via the investigation of empirical phenomena in relation to the wide array of determinations that movement revealed. Such a movement is necessary to clarify the distinctiveness of culture’s socially reproductive functions. I have no intention of conflating domestic labor or healthcare work with the labors of culture. Social reproduction is a variegated phenomenon: one can only draw equivalencies between different forms and their attendant struggles at the highest levels of abstraction. Such abstractions are nonetheless historically suggestive. Here, I will briefly consider how the systematic analysis presented above can be brought to bear on the current crisis of social reproduction. This is the context a “re-energized” sense of culture can speak to. My goals here are modest: I aim to be suggestive rather than definitive, demonstrating the empirical utility of SRT to cultural studies, as well as vice versa.

The current social reproduction crisis began with the dismantling of the industrially oriented state-managed capitalism of the Fordist period in the global north. The postwar state aimed to contain capital’s undermining of labor-power by investing in social reproductive institutions like healthcare and higher working-class wages paid to white male breadwinners, otherwise known as the “family wage.” The reproduction of white

working class labor-power depended on patriarchal gender and sexual relations, white supremacist exclusions, and imperialist expropriation of the global south.<sup>132</sup> The neoliberal turn prompted by the economic crises of the 1960s and 1970s brought state divestment from these socially reproductive institutions and the end of the Fordist family wage.<sup>133</sup> Reprivatized public services replaced the former, the “dual income family” replaced the latter: patriarchal gender and sexual relations, white supremacist exclusions, and imperialist exploitation continued, though in different forms. As one group of feminist economists puts it, “Care needs and the soaring costs of access to privatized health, education, and utilities have been thoroughly placed in the hands of households and have come to be privately shouldered by families.”<sup>134</sup> The result is a “dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, as some in the second category provide care work in return for (low) wages for those in the first.”<sup>135</sup> This is what Fraser and others have called a “crisis of care” that has continued the immiseration of social labor-power.

These crises of care unfold differently in low-income nations of the global south, but no less disastrously, shaped by the same drive towards accumulation undermining the labor force of the global north but exacerbated by that hemisphere’s exploitive relationship towards the south.<sup>136</sup> In such regions, state investment in social reproductive institutions followed a very different trajectory, with some states never having any and others developing and implementing subsidies for socially reproductive purposes.<sup>137</sup> This means the process of reprivatization described above is not directly applicable. Furthermore, such regions feature economies dependent upon agricultural production, informal labor forces, and unfree labor, meaning the dynamics unfold differently than those dictated by the labor and valorization process dictated by industrial capital.<sup>138</sup> As Smriti Rao puts it, outside the global north, the crisis expresses itself in “the inability to perform forms of indirect care—in particular to secure the inputs necessary to generate food, drink, and a safe and clean-living space.”<sup>139</sup>

If culture performs a socially reproductive function within the systematic logic of capital, then changes in formal and informal cultural production must be understood in these terms. Consider my periodization of the global north’s most recent social reproductive crisis. In the United States, the dismantling of the welfare state and the privatization of swathes of social services accompanied the dismantling and privatization, in whole or in part, of public cultural institutions. This took a variety of forms, such as attempts to defund institutions like the National Endowment for the Arts and the replacing of government grants for the arts with loans, ensuring cultural workers went into debt.<sup>140</sup> Beyond the direct control of the state, formerly paid cultural labors are increasingly becoming unremunerated via institutional dependencies on internships and volunteering, what Leigh Claire La Berge calls “decommodified labor.”<sup>141</sup> These can be read as assaults on social reproduction insofar as they undermine material support for labor-power sustaining cultural activity, part of neoliberalism’s assault on social reproduction in general.

Such attacks accompanied the deregulation and expansion of the cultural industries: private media firms grew and commodified new spheres of cultural activity as socially reproductive institutions languished.<sup>142</sup> As the already paltry US welfare state disintegrated, culture became a growing sector of the economy and site of consumer

spending, the much vaunted “creative economy.”<sup>143</sup> For instance, the average amount of television individuals living in the United States watched increased from 1,226 hours per person per year in 1970 to 1,575 in 1995.<sup>144</sup> Across the same time span, the amount of money the average person living in the United States spent on recreational activities increased from \$93.8 per person per year to \$395.5 (in 1992 dollars, adjusted for inflation).<sup>145</sup> These figures cannot speak directly to any causal relationship, but the decline of social reproduction institutions alongside cultural industrial growth in the context of neoliberalism raises the possibility that commodified cultural activity has been taking the place of other socially reproductive activities.

This hypothesis is consistent with the few recent works that attend to the socially reproductive qualities of culture. Take the work of Jarrett and Drott, for instance.<sup>146</sup> They explore the socially reproductive functions of digital media forms, investigating the particular “social pleasures” of sharing memes on social media (specifically Facebook) and listening to algorithmically selected playlists on music streaming services (like Spotify), respectively. These practices happen within the circuit of labor-power’s reproduction, within a world structured by deadening work that depletes bodies and minds. “Posting” or “vibing” offers recompense that serves as a deposit in one’s “vital forces,” enabling that deadening work to continue. They jointly suggest that neoliberalism depends, in part, upon the reproduction of labor-power vis-à-vis culture’s affective and psychological impacts. Culture in this context serves as another individually shouldered means of reconstituting one’s capacities as a worker. As Drott notes, capitalists and the state are well aware that music can serve a therapeutic function, a cheap alternative to pharmacological and medical interventions likely necessary due to poor working conditions in the first place.<sup>147</sup>

The current crisis of social reproduction appears to have heightened culture’s reproductive function, at least in the geographic and political context described above. It seems to be picking up the reproductive slack as the neoliberal state cedes control of previously relied upon institutions to the logic and forces of capital, another example of the ways individuals come to bear the burden of reproducing themselves such that they can survive amidst the regime of wage labor. This comes into view in light of the systematic relationship I sketch above between culture and labor-power, one complementary to and entwined with that between culture and capitalism generally that scholars have long focused on. As noted above, social reproduction is historically variegated. These preliminary conclusions are limited, but illustrate how culture might be thought in socially reproductive terms in other contexts like the global south, as well as at other scales of inquiry.

If the changing political economic terrain of the postwar world prompted the reexamination of culture as a terrain of politics and object of inquiry, then the current conjuncture demands likewise. Otherwise, the field cannot speak fully to the political tasks of the moment. As Hall reminds us, “When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no ‘going back.’ History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment. You have to attend, ‘violently,’ with all the ‘pessimism of the intellect’ at your command, to the ‘discipline of the conjuncture.’”<sup>148</sup> Attending to the reproductive relationship between culture and labor-power is part of that process, meaning there is a historical and political imperative to go “back to basics.” Reenergizing the field’s intellectual and political commitments must be a matter of thinking through the reproductive roles culture plays in this context beyond their

representation within it. The failure to do so is to think through the societal at the expense of the social, generating a fragmented portrait of capitalism's integrated totality.

Considering culture in these terms is all the more important given the absence of any sustained consideration of it within recent discussions of Marxist SRT. I wrote this essay with a cultural studies audience in mind, but I could have easily written it for those immersed in SRT, urging them to substantively consider the theoretical traditions of cultural studies. Bhattachararya's oft-cited edited collection *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (2017), for example, does not feature any essays speaking directly to cultural matters.<sup>149</sup> This strikes me as a missed opportunity. If SRT aims to expand the range of practices associated with class struggle, the inattention to culture means there is much work to do on that front. The history of cultural contestation documented by scholars like Hall attests to this. The cultural studies "boom" of the 1980s and 1990s occurred amidst the crisis described above. We might reread the endless cataloging of cultural "resistance" that many argued amounted to populist celebrations of the commodity-form as an index of creative attempts to sustain labor-power amidst austerity, different than struggles for healthcare, housing, and childcare in degree rather than kind. Etymologically, "culture" has agricultural roots, denoting cultivation and growth: it can be understood as a form of "care." Striplhas asks what it might mean to imagine cultural studies as a "care discipline."<sup>150</sup> Though he aims to prompt considerations of how the field can nurture itself, the shift of perspective I suggest means we can also consider "care" to be its object of analysis, meaning the history of cultural studies and that of contemporary Marxist SRT may already be implicitly aligned.

## Coda: Culture and COVID-19

If capitalism's crises of care "exhaust women, ravage families, and stretch social energies to the breaking point," those women are exhausted, those families ravaged, and those social energies broken.<sup>151</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic makes this clear. Members of the Ridgewood Queens-based commune Woodbine wrote in the pandemic's earliest moments that it signaled "a general crisis of social reproduction with no end in sight . . . with the shutdown of businesses, schools, and countless other institutions, millions are facing loss of income, housing, and access to basic survival resources, exacerbating long-standing inequalities and pushing ever more people into precarity."<sup>152</sup> This proved true. The pandemic has accelerated neoliberalism's crisis of care, rendering it a catastrophe: capital's circulation ground to a halt and labor markets either contracted or collapsed, heightening everyday uncertainty for all except the wealthy. In the regions hardest hit—such as the United States, Brazil and India—governments responded with half-measures of temporary Keynesian-style support that ultimately put low-wage workers, women, and racial and ethnic minorities at physical and financial risk.<sup>153</sup> Saad-Filho wrote in May of 2020,

the uber-rich moved into their yachts, the merely rich fled to their second homes, the middle class struggled to work from home in the company of overexcited children and the poor, already having worse health, on average, than the privileged, either lost their earnings entirely or had to risk their lives daily to perform much-praised but . . . low-paid “essential work” as nurses, care workers, porters, bus drivers, shopkeepers, builders, sanitation officers, delivery workers and so on; meanwhile their families remained locked up in cramped accommodation.<sup>154</sup>

The household, the *locus classicus* of SRT, figures prominently in Saad-Filho’s characterization. It assumed a new centrality in social life: some worked from home, others stayed there due to unemployment; typically separated sites of domestic and wage labor became one.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, the economic fallout meant housing was increasingly unstable: working class renters increasingly face eviction, a situation only avoided via rental-assistance programs and tenuous state-mandated moratoria.<sup>156</sup> COVID capitalism reconfigured the relations of reproductive labor. Their permanence and impact remain to be seen.

Attending to culture’s socially reproductive function will be a part of understanding this impact. The cultural terrain shifted drastically. Cultural industries contracted, leaving cultural workers unemployed and unevenly supported by state systems.<sup>157</sup> The experience of lockdown and quarantine changed how individuals engaged in cultural activity. Just consider the frequency and intensity with which those rendered homebound consumed media, often on the same machines and in the same spaces they used to work remotely, attend school, and reproduce themselves and others, collapsing the spatial distinctions between the labors of culture, wage labor, and reproductive labors.<sup>158</sup>

Woodbine is notable in this context: as an organization, it illustrates the political possibilities that emerge when we think through the socially reproductive aspects of culture. Founded in December 2013, Woodbine is a “experimental hub in New York City for developing the practice, skills, and tools needed to build autonomy.”<sup>159</sup> Initially, it served as a venue for anti-capitalist culture and politics, hosting film screenings, a community garden, a farm share, and weekly dinners open to all. With the pandemic’s onset, Woodbine’s organizers rapidly transitioned to the work of mutual aid, partnering with “community crisis task force” Hungry Monk to run a twice-weekly food pantry for their neighborhood’s working class, part of a large network of mutual aid groups that sprang up in the United States for the same reasons.<sup>160</sup> As they put it, “The failure of the government to provide a bailout adequate to the crisis must necessarily be met with self-organization, community resilience, and care.”<sup>161</sup> The food pantry continues alongside their cultural and political activities.<sup>162</sup> The relative ease with which Woodbine transitioned from focusing on cultural activities to distributing food speaks to a recognition of their shared social reproductive function: they are both forms of care.<sup>163</sup> We might think of Woodbine as a holistic social reproductive institution, a site where it is possible for workers to reproduce labor-power outside the state and the ordinary circuits of capital. As such, it troubles the link between social and societal reproduction. Woodbine does not exist as a legal, corporate, or nonprofit entity, but as a volunteer-run “free association of people.”<sup>164</sup> It is a collective that began as a self-identified cultural space built within the contemporary social factory. The labors of culture created an infrastructure capable of sustaining a diverse




array of other socially reproductive labors. On the local level, it is managing capitalism's inherent social reproductive contradictions while also creating conditions that enable the resistance to labor-power in itself.











I do not intend to overstate the political possibilities of culture's socially reproductive functions, only to identify them as a site of struggle over material necessities and as such one of the many places in which an oppositional politics animated by a desire for a new "historical bloc" might take hold. If an air of melancholy surrounds cultural studies, a sense that its own political desires went unrealized, then it might heed experiments such as Woodbine that trouble the link between social and societal reproduction. The link itself is a fruitful area of intellectual inquiry, but attending to their rupture or the possibility thereof spotlights points of struggle worth supporting, building upon, or emulating. They come into view when we look through and test the systematic model developed throughout this essay against the historical unfolding of the latest capitalist crisis. Writing in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Hall claimed that cultural studies needed to think through culture as a "site of life and death."<sup>165</sup> He was speaking of the value of attending to representations, but it is just as applicable to the objects of analysis introduced in this work. His point stands: such intellectual work remains a "deadly serious matter."<sup>166</sup> Again, the COVID-19 pandemic makes this clear: 4,400,048 deaths globally at the time of writing; that number will have increased by the time this article appears.<sup>167</sup>

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25. For examples in social movement studies, art history, performance studies, and information and media studies, see Jeffrey R. Webber, "Resurrection of the Dead, Exaltation of the New Struggles," *Historical Materialism* 27, no. 1 (2019): 5–54, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-00001815> < <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-00001815> > ; Angela Dimitrakaki and Kirsten Lloyd, "Social Reproduction Struggles and Art History," *Third Text* 31, no. 1 (2017): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1358963> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1358963> > ; Beth Capper and Rebecca Schneider, "Performance and Reproduction: Introduction," *TDR/ The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 8–13, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\\_e\\_00715](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_e_00715) < [https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\\_e\\_00715](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_e_00715) > ; Elise D. Thorburn, "Networked Social Reproduction: Crises in the Integrated Circuit," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism, & Critique* 14, no. 2 (2016): 380–96, <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v14i2.708> < <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v14i2.708> > . 
26. See Victoria Horne, "The Art of Social Reproduction," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 2 (2016): 179–202, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412916632284> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412916632284> > ; Beth Capper, "Domestic Unrest: Social Reproduction and the Temporalities of Struggle in Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*," *Third Text* 31, no. 1 (2017): 97–116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1366410> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1366410> > ; Jo Littler, "Mothers Behaving Badly: Chaotic Hedonism and the Crisis of Neoliberal Social Reproduction," *Cultural Studies*, 2019, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2019.1633371> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2019.1633371> > ; Rosemary Hennessy, "Toward an Ecology of Life-Making: The Re-Membering of Meridel Le Sueur," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3841> < <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3841> > . 
27. Marina Vishmidt has made a similar observation about the treatment of social reproduction in feminist art and art history. See Marina Vishmidt, "The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s," *Third Text* 31, no. 1 (2017): 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1364331> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1364331> > . 
28. Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, "Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives," *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): 383, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.15.080189.002121> < <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.15.080189.002121> > . Laslett and Brenner's work is a frequent touchstone for scholars working on SRT. For instance, both Bhattacharya and Munro draw upon it, even as the latter critiques the former. See Tithi Bhattacharya, "Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 6–7; Kirstin Munro, "'Social Reproduction Theory,' Social Reproduction, and Household Production," *Science & Society* 83, no. 4 (October 2019): 451–68, <https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.2019.83.4.451> < <https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.2019.83.4.451> > . 
29. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn," 96; Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, 25–73; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford


University Press, 1978), 11–20. 


30. Kylie Jarrett, "Devaluing Binaries: Marxist Feminism and the Value of Consumer Labor," in *Reconsidering Value and Labour in the Digital Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 207–23; Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Eric Drott, "Music in the Work of Social Reproduction," *Cultural Politics* 15, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-7515028> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-7515028> > : 162–83; Kalman-Lamb, "Athletic Labor and Social Reproduction." On culture's centrality to contemporary capitalism, see Stuart Hall, "The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolutions of Our Time," in *Media and Cultural Regulation*, ed. Kenneth Thompson (London: Sage Publications, 1997); David Throsby, "The Cultural Industries as a Sector of the Economy," in *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries*, ed. Kate Oakley and Justin O'Connor (London: Routledge, 2015), 56–69; Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016). 
31. I am taking a cue from Christopher Arthur's and Tony Smith's understandings of the relationship between systematic and historical dialectics. Arthur writes, "the system comprises a set of categories expressing the forms and relations embedded within the totality, its 'moments.' The task of systematic dialectic is to organize such a system of categories in a definite sequence, deriving one from another logically." This is necessary if one's object of analysis is a totality: SRT hinges upon such a totality. Tony Smith suggests that while such a conceptual project will always be partially incongruous with a historical project concerned with detailing the "main lines of capitalist development," it nonetheless suggests where those "lines" are heading. See Christopher J. Arthur, "Systematic Dialectic," in *Dialectics for a New Century*, ed. Bertell Ollman and Tony Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 212; Tony Smith, "Systematic and Historical Dialectics: Towards a Marxian Theory of Globalization," in *New Dialectics and Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 24–28. 
32. Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode," *New Left Review* 86 (April 2014): 57, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii86/articles/nancy-fraser-behind-marx-s-hidden-abode> < <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii86/articles/nancy-fraser-behind-marx-s-hidden-abode> > . For a challenge to the idea that Marx ignored labor-power's reproduction, see Paul Cammack, "Marx on Social Reproduction," *Historical Materialism* 28, no. 2 (2020): 76–106, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-00001934> < <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-00001934> > . 
33. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 274. 
34. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, 3rd ed. (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975), 11. 
35. Mario Tronti, "Factory and Society," in *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder (New York: Verso, 2019), 12–35; Antonio Negri, "Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today," in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl (Routledge, 1996), 159. On the connection between Tronti, Dalla Costa, and James, see Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 58–59. 
36. Dalla Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, 33. 
37. Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton, "The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis et al. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 149–74; Amy De'Ath, "Gender and Social Reproduction," in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O'Kane (London: Sage Publications, 2018), 1534–50. On the debate over the productive or unproductive character of domestic labor and its influence, see Frigga Haug, "The Marx Within Feminism," in *Marxism and Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 81–83. 


38. Maya Gonzalez, "The Gendered Circuit: Reading the Arcane of Reproduction," *Viewpoint Magazine*, September 28, 2013, <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/28/the-gendered-circuit-reading-the-arcane-of-reproduction> < <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/28/the-gendered-circuit-reading-the-arcane-of-reproduction> > . 
39. See Amy De'Ath, "Reproduction," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 395–404; Tithi Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 70–71. 
40. Laslett and Brenner, "Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives," 383. 
41. Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991). 
42. Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, 13; Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction*, trans. Craig Charney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 20. Aglietta does note the reproductive function of the household in his very brief (two paragraph) discussion of a "domestic form of production." See Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, 172–73. 
43. Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, 151–208. 
44. Munro, "'Social Reproduction Theory,' Social Reproduction, and Household Production." 
45. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. David Fernbach, vol. 2 (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 109. 
46. Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 73; Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," 80. 
47. For an accessible account of Marx's reproductive schemas, see Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 131–40. 
48. On the relationship between Marx's general circuit of capital and that of labor-power's reproduction, see Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 123. 
49. Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," 81. Cleaver argues similarly, though not in the context of SRT. See Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 123. 
50. Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," 81. 
51. David McNally and Sue Ferguson, "Social Reproduction Beyond Intersectionality: An Interview," *Viewpoint Magazine* 5 (October 2015), <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/social-reproduction-beyond-intersectionality-an-interview-with-sue-ferguson-and-david-mcnally> < <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/social-reproduction-beyond-intersectionality-an-interview-with-sue-ferguson-and-david-mcnally> > . 
52. McNally and Ferguson. 
53. Marxist theories of social reproduction maintain the insights of "intersectionality" as an analytical framework while transcending its aggregative rather than dialectical treatment of oppressions. See Susan Ferguson, "Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms: Toward an Integrative Ontology," *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (2016): 38–60, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341471> < <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341471> > ;





David McNally, "Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 94–111. It also refutes class reductionist positions that cast sexuality, race, and gender as "contingent rather than exigent" to the capitalist mode of production. See Tithi Bhattacharya, "From the Production of Value to the Valuing of Production," in *Capitalism: Concept, Idea, Image – Aspects of Marx's Capital Today*, ed. Peter Osbourne, Alliez Éric, and Russell Eric-John (London: CRMEP Books, 2019), 105–6. 


54. Susan Ferguson et al., "Introduction," *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (2016): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341469> < <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341469> > . 


55. Isabella Bakker and Rachel Silvey, "Introduction: Social Reproduction and Global Transformations – From the Everyday to the Global" (London: Routledge, 2008), 3. See also the essays collected in Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, eds., *Power, Production and Social Reproduction: Human In/Security in the Global Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Isabella Bakker and Rachel Silvey, eds., *Beyond States and Markets: The Challenges of Social Reproduction* (London: Routledge, 2008); Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*. 

56. Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 144. 

57. Rebecca Jane Hall, "Reproduction and Resistance: An Anti-Colonial Contribution to Social-Reproduction Feminism," *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (2016): 87–110, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341473> < <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341473> > . 


58. Sean Johnson Andrews writes that Hall's work "provide snapshots" of cultural studies that capture theoretical antagonisms within it. As such they provide a useful shorthand for trends in the field. See Sean Johnson Andrews, *Hegemony, Mass Media, and Cultural Studies: Properties of Meaning, Power, and Value in Cultural Production* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 155. On Hall's impact, see Julien Henriques, David Morley, and Vana Goblot, eds., *Stuart Hall: Conversations, Projects, and Legacies* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2017). 


59. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg, "Editor's Introduction," in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), vii–xiv; Mariah L. Wellman, "1983—Stuart Hall Visits Australia and North America," *Lateral* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2019), ≤ <https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.13> > <https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.13> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.13> > ; Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, 74. 

60. Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, 24. 

61. Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983*, 154. 


62. See Steve Jones, "The Gramscian Turn in British Cultural Studies: From the Birmingham School to Cultural Populism," in *British Marxism and Cultural Studies: Essays on a Living Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2016), 106–31. 











63. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014), 232–72. 

64. Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983*, 88, 130–31, 136. 

65. Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983*, 1. 


66. See, for instance, foundational texts like Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1993); Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Morningside ed.















(New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 171–93. Labor-power is not investigated in the former and appears specifically in relation to societal reproduction in the latter. 

67. There are also exceptions in fields adjacent to cultural studies as defined in this essay. Dallas Smythe's work on the "audience commodity" in communication studies, for instance, suggests that leisure time plays a role in reproducing labor-power. However, this observation is incidental to his primary concern: the way the audience commodity helps realize surplus value. See Dallas W. Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Society Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1–28. 
68. Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 366–72. 
69. Lucy Bland et al., "Women 'Inside and Outside' the Relations of Production," in *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination*, ed. Women's Studies Group (London: Routledge, 2007). 
70. Hazel Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1970s Britain* (London: Routledge, 2005), 212–34; Pratibha Parmar, "Gender, Race and Class: Asian Women in Resistance," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1970s Britain* (London: Routledge, 2005), 235–74. 
71. A. J. Veal, "Is There Enough Leisure Time? Leisure Studies, Work-Life Balance, the Realm of Necessity and the Realm of Freedom," *World Leisure Journal* 62, no. 2 (2020): 104–5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2019.1667423> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2019.1667423> >; Chris Rojek, *Capitalism and Leisure Theory* (London: Tavistock, 1985). 
72. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Paul Smith, "Introduction," in *The Renewal of Cultural Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 1. 
73. Janice Peck, "Itinerary of a Thought: Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies, and the Unresolved Problem of the Relation of Culture to 'Not Culture,'" *Cultural Critique* 48 (Spring 2001): 236–40, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2001.0038> < <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2001.0038> >; Chris Rojek, *Stuart Hall* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 14. See also Maxwell, "Political Economy within Cultural Studies." 
74. Peck, "Itinerary of a Thought." 
75. Toby Miller, "Culture + Labour = Precariat," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2010): 96–99; Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn," 91; Michael Denning, "What's Wrong with Cultural Studies," in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 147–66; Christian Fuchs, "Karl Marx and the Study of Media and Culture Today," *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 6, no. 1 (February 20, 2014): 39–76, <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.14639> < <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.14639> >. 
76. For instance, Christian Fuchs has insisted on a return to the labor theory of value but has not engaged with the question of labor-power. See Fuchs, "Karl Marx and the Study of Media and Culture Today," 54–74. See also Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Smith, *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*; Rodman, *Why Cultural Studies?* 
77. For instance, Paul Smith argues vis-à-vis the Regulation School that the "means of consumption" are essential to the production of neoliberal capitalism's "subject of value." In his account, this is a primarily ideological phenomenon. His examples here include major tenets of capitalist ideology such as the primacy of private property. This is an ideological presumption that ensures labor-power's circulation. Despite the different theoretical framework, this

resembles Hall's discussion of labor-power in his 1983 lectures. See Paul Smith, *Millennial Dreams: Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North* (London: Verso, 1997), 82–83. [↗](#)


















78. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn"; Michael Denning, "'So-Called Cultural Histories': Cultural Studies and History in the Age of One World," in *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*, ed. Paul Smith (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 133–42. [↗](#)
79. See, for instance, Andrews, *Hegemony, Mass Media, and Cultural Studies: Properties of Meaning, Power, and Value in Cultural Production*. Denning models this approach in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998). [↗](#)
80. Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983*, 89. [↗](#)
81. Ferguson, "Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms: Toward an Integrative Ontology," 48; Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn," 92. [↗](#)
82. Striplhas, "Caring for Cultural Studies," 5–6. [↗](#)
83. Michael Denning, "The End of Mass Culture," in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 104. [↗](#)
84. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn," 94. [↗](#)
85. Here, my thinking is indebted to my reading of Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton's important work on the historical construction of gender in the context of SRT. My rudimentary distinction between cultural labor in and outside the cultural industries is premised on the categories they introduce to understand the relation of concrete activities to the production of value: the directly market mediated sphere and the indirectly market mediated sphere, the latter of which is both waged and unwaged. See Gonzalez and Neton, "The Logic of Gender." [↗](#)
86. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:163. [↗](#)
87. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn," 95. [↗](#)
88. Working within a Marxist feminist framework attuned to reproductive labor, Rosemary Hennessy notes that human needs are affective as much as they are physical. See Rosemary Hennessy, *Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2013), 37–68. [↗](#)
89. Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class," 81. [↗](#)
90. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture," 96. [↗](#)
91. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture," 96. [↗](#)
92. Dalla Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, 11. [↗](#)
93. Denning, "'So-Called Cultural Histories': Cultural Studies and History in the Age of One World," 138–39. [↗](#)
94. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:270, 274. [↗](#)
95. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:275. [↗](#)
96. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:275. [↗](#)
97. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:275. [↗](#)
98. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:275; Ben Fine, "Debating Lebowitz: Is Class Conflict the Moral and Historical Element in the Value of Labour-Power?," *Historical Materialism*












16, no. 3 (2008): 105–14, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920608X315257> < <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920608X315257>> ; Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Marx 200: The Abiding Relevance of the Labour Theory of Value," *Review of Political Economy* 30, no. 3 (2018): 339–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09538259.2018.1424068> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/09538259.2018.1424068>> . 











99. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1978, 2:479. 
100. Denning, "'So-Called Cultural Histories': Cultural Studies and History in the Age of One World," 138. 
101. Guido Starosta and Alejandro Fitzsimons have referred to this as workers' "productive subjectivity." See Guido Starosta and Alejandro Fitzsimons, "Rethinking the Determination of the Value of Labor Power," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 50, no. 1 (2018): 102–4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0486613416670968> < <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0486613416670968>> . 
102. Karl Marx, "Workers' Questionnaire," in *Karl Marx-Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24 (New York: International Publishers, 1880), 332. 
103. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:277. 
104. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:274–75. 
105. Marx says in the *Grundrisse*, "the capitalist likes nothing better than for {the worker} to squander his dosages of vital force as much as possible, without interruption." See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, 1973; reprint (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 294. The phrase "vital forces" likely derives from German chemist Justus von Liebig, who used it to describe the immaterial, even mystical, sources underlying physiological motion. Given Marx's materialist commitments and his interest in Liebig's materialist challengers, I read his use of the term as a poetic or ironic attempt to synthesize the totality of the physical and mental components of labor. On this conceptual history, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 160. For an affective reading of "vital forces" see John McMahon, "Vital Forces: Marx and the Tension of Capitalist Affect," *Lateral* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L7.1.4> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L7.1.4>> . 
106. Marx writes, "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks." See Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:342. 
107. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:341. 
108. In this context, "civilization" refers to the level of development of a given society's productive forces. See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 308, 584; Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 59. 
109. On the immiserating nature of the capitalist labor process, see Joseph Fracchia, "The Capitalist Labour-Process and the Body in Pain: The Corporeal Depths of Marx's Concept of Immiseration," *Historical Materialism* 16, no. 4 (2008): 35–66, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920608X357729> < <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920608X357729>> . 
110. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:341. 
111. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:275. 
112. Karl Marx, "Wage-Labour and Capital," in *Wage-Labor and Capital & Value, Price and Profit* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 33. 



113. Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London: Verso, 2018), 67–73; Theodor Adorno, "Theses on Need," in *Towards a New Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019), 79–89. [↗](#)
114. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). [↗](#)
115. Endnotes, "Communisation and Value-Form Theory," *Endnotes 2* (2010): 90, <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/2/en/endnotes-communisation-and-value-form-theory>. [↗](#)
116. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:718. [↗](#)
117. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:275. [↗](#)
118. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn," 96. [↗](#)
119. For a refutation of this common criticism of SRT, see Cinzia Arruzza, "Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist: Social Reproduction Feminism and Its Critics," *Science & Society: A Journal of Marxist Thought and Analysis* 80, no. 1 (January 2016): 9–30, <https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.2016.80.1.9> < <https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.2016.80.1.9>> . [↗](#)
120. On competing interpretations of the "historical and moral" determinants of labor-power, see Guido Starosta, *Marx's Capital, Method, and Revolutionary Subjectivity* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 222–32. [↗](#)
121. Hall, *Cultural Studies* 1983, 180–206. Guido Starosta and Alejandro Fitzsimons have recently argued similarly when suggesting that class struggle "mediates" those "historical and moral" determinants of labor-power's value. See Starosta and Fitzsimons, "Rethinking the Determination of the Value of Labor Power." [↗](#)
122. Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture," 90; Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 212 (August 1995): 68–93, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i212/articles/nancy-fraser-from-redistribution-to-recognition-dilemmas-of-justice-in-a-post-socialist-age> < <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i212/articles/nancy-fraser-from-redistribution-to-recognition-dilemmas-of-justice-in-a-post-socialist-age>> . [↗](#)
123. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:376. [↗](#)
124. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, 1:375. [↗](#)
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127. Lin Xiaocao, a pseudonym used by a woman involved in the 2010 Strike at Nahai Honda in Foshan, Guangdong, China, writes, "Workers will, after working for a certain amount of time, become hungry and tired, get *bored*, sick or pregnant, have children, and finally grow old and retire to enjoy their old age in peace. Therefore, the wage that is paid in compensation for their work must, besides covering their daily needs for food and clothing, be sufficient to cover the costs of a *decent life* with an appropriate amount of *leisure* time, provide for a family, and guarantee a livelihood in old age." Emphasis mine, see "The Awakening of Lin Xiaocao: A Personal Account of the 2010 Strike at Nanhai Honda," *Chuang* 2 (2019): 436, <https://chuangcn.org/journal/two/the-awakening-of-lin-xiaocao> < <https://chuangcn.org/journal/two/the-awakening-of-lin-xiaocao>> . [↗](#)
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## Arctic Pedagogy: Indigenous People and the MACOS Culture War

by Susan Hegeman | Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** This paper is about the place of Indigenous people in an early instance of a culture war in the United States: the conflict in the 1970s over an innovative middle-grades social studies curriculum called “Man: A Course of Study” (MACOS). Funded by the National Science Foundation, MACOS sought to revamp social studies education by addressing big questions about humans as a species and as social animals. It quickly came under fire from conservatives and helped to solidify the concept of “secular humanism” as a social threat. A broad conservative organizing effort, whose effects can still be felt today, eventually ended not only MACOS, but the very viability of school curriculum reform projects on the national level. Though this story is familiar to historians of American education, this paper argues for its centrality to the development of contemporary conservative politics and the early history of the culture wars. It also takes up the largely unaddressed issue of how Indigenous people figured in the MACOS curriculum and in the ensuing controversy. Focusing on the ethnographic film series featuring Netsilik Inuit that was at the heart of the MACOS curriculum, this paper addresses the largely unacknowledged legacy of Indigenous pedagogy, to argue that the culture war that led to the demise of the MACOS project also represented a lost opportunity for Indigenous knowledge and teaching to be incorporated into the formal schooling of American children.

**KEYWORDS** Indigenous peoples, representation, education, pedagogy, culture wars, MACOS, social studies, Inuit

This article is about the place of Indigenous people in an early instance of a culture war in the United States. It involves an experimental social studies curriculum for American students in the fourth through sixth grade, created in the 1960s and early 1970s by a team of distinguished educators, scholars, filmmakers, and artists. Funded by the National Science Foundation, “Man: A Course of Study” (better known by its acronym MACOS) sought to replace traditional social studies education in civics and history with “hard” social sciences like anthropology and behavioral psychology. The MACOS curriculum materials were lavishly produced, consisting of 770 pages of teacher’s guides; dozens of student booklets and films, records, educational games, maps and other wall graphics; and even a “take-apart seal”—all offered at a cost of three thousand dollars for five classrooms.<sup>1</sup> Despite its costliness, by 1972, it reached some 400,000 students in 1,700 classrooms across the United States.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat to the surprise of its creators, however, MACOS came under intense political scrutiny, first from isolated parents and education critics, then from organized groups, and ultimately from members of the United States Congress, who effectively shut down not only the federal funding for MACOS, but to a great extent, the very viability of curricular reform projects on the national level. Though

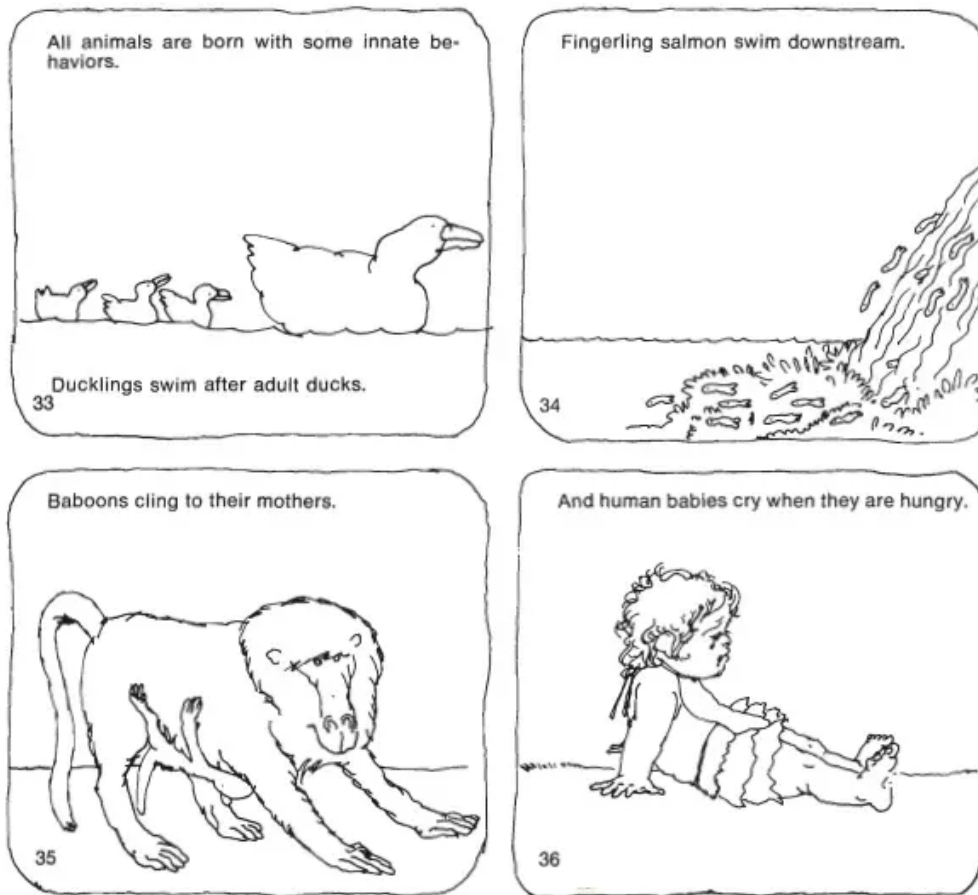
this story is familiar to historians of American education, it deserves wider consideration for its centrality to the development of conservative politics and the early history of the culture wars.

Even less discussed is the place of Indigenous people in the MACOS curriculum and the controversy it provoked. At the center of the MACOS curriculum was an ethnographic film series that portrayed the traditional practices and day-to-day life of Netsilik Inuit of what was then called Pelly Bay, Canada (now Kugaaruk, Nunavut).<sup>3</sup> Both formally innovative and grounded in colonialist representational traditions, the Netsilik Film Series had a prominent place in the controversy over MACOS, and is an important document in its own right in a tradition of filmmaking by and about Inuit beginning with *Nanook of the North* (dir. Robert Flaherty, 1922)—often cited as the first ethnographic film and even the first feature-length documentary—and culminating in the award-winning media produced by the Inuit company Igloodik Isuma Productions.<sup>4</sup> As film produced for educational purposes, the Netsilik Film Series represents more than a tradition of innovative uses of media in education; it points as well to a largely unacknowledged legacy of Indigenous pedagogy. The culture war that led to the demise of the MACOS project, then, also resulted in a lost opportunity for Indigenous knowledge and teaching to be incorporated into the formal schooling of American children.

## What is Human About Humans? The MACOS Controversy

Funded by the National Science Foundation under its remit to ensure the United States' global supremacy in the sciences and technical fields and conceptualized by academics in the post-war universities that formed a key research component of the military-industrial complex, the MACOS curriculum was in many ways a characteristic product of the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> The curriculum was big and ambitious in investment, conception, and execution, bringing together the talents of dozens of educators, writers, designers, artists, and filmmakers, and research social scientists—notably the anthropologists Irven DeVore and Asen Balikci. But MACOS's central visionary was the well-known academic psychologist Jerome Bruner. Under his leadership, the curriculum would come to be focused on animal and human behavior, and was grounded in the cutting-edge developmental psychology of the period.<sup>6</sup>





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/1.Innate-and-Learned-Behavior-5-Susan-Hegeman.jpg> >

Figure 1. Page from student booklet, "Innate and Learned Behavior" (Educational Development Center, 1970), <http://www.macosonline.org/booklets/Innate%20and%20Learned%20Behavior.pdf> < <http://www.macosonline.org/booklets/Innate%20and%20Learned%20Behavior.pdf> > .

As an educational psychologist, Bruner adhered to a number of principles loosely derived from the progressive educational tradition: that learning should be active rather than passive; that it was important to teach the "structure" of fields of knowledge; and that the process of inquiry—learning how to learn—was more important than the mastery of decontextualized facts. Perhaps more remarkably, and more closely related to both his work in behavioral psychology and his own place within the academic meritocracy, Bruner also held that "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any age of development."<sup>7</sup> He saw no reason, in other words, to keep young children away from traditionally college-level subjects like psychology, ethology, sociology, and anthropology. Indeed, "if one respects the ways of thought of the growing child, if one is courteous enough to translate material into his logical forms and challenging enough to tempt him in advance, then it is possible to introduce him at an early age to the ideas and styles that in later life make an educated man [sic]."<sup>8</sup> In what Bruner described as a "spiral curriculum," these concepts and modes of thinking could then be revisited in increasingly complex ways as children's cognitive capacities developed.

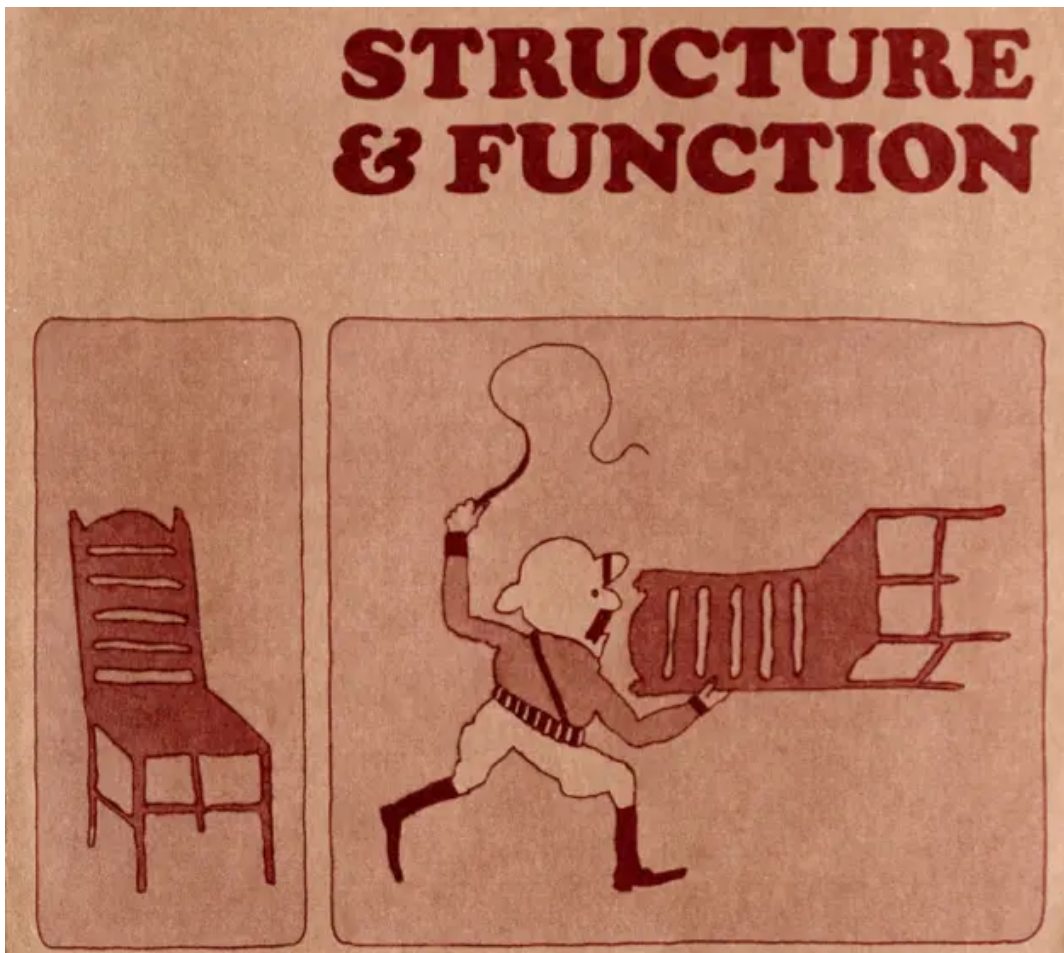


Following from these premises, MACOS represented a massive departure from the traditional social studies curriculum consisting of history, civics, and geography, long seen as central to the inculcation of the virtues of American citizenship and national pride. By focusing instead on issues germane to the more “scientific” social scientific disciplines, MACOS offered to reform a social studies curriculum that was regarded by many educators as short on “structure” and too focused on learning “atomized” information. In the place of the social mission of instilling nationalism and civic engagement, MACOS framed its value in more internationalist terms, but nevertheless in keeping with American Cold War ideology. The MACOS creators saw their project as giving students the habits of mind conducive to what Fred Turner has described as the anti-totalitarian “democratic personality,” which focused on social comity and cohesion through acceptance of individual differences and cultural diversity. Along the ideological lines of Edward Steichen’s famous 1955 photography exhibition, MACOS would show children that despite whatever our outward differences, we were all part of “The Family of Man.”<sup>9</sup>

The development of the MACOS curriculum shows just how much its participants were driven by this Cold War liberal ethos of unity in cultural diversity. It was originally conceived as a multi-grade curriculum that would follow a loosely developmentalist model of historical and evolutionary stages of human society. Unit 1 would address “A nomadic group” and feature the Netsilik documentary films; Unit 2, devoted to two hunter-gathering societies, would use the Dani of Papua, New Guinea and !Kung people of the Kalahari as examples; and subsequent units would move through the origins of agriculture (Tehuacán Valley, Mexico), urbanism in Mesopotamia, and finally the Bronze Age in Ancient Greece.<sup>10</sup> When Bruner took over the MACOS project, he rejected the six-unit model on pedagogical grounds, as being too information-heavy and insufficiently conceptual. Others (notably DeVore) objected to its implied teleological bias toward Western civilization. His participation pushed the curriculum away from evolutionary models and toward cross-cultural and cross-species comparison.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, a number of participants in the MACOS project expressed strong reservations about including the planned ethnographic films of the !Kung and Dani. They felt that without a full classroom airing of issues of American racism and racist stereotypes—which they considered to be impossible in the racially charged climate of the 1970s—films about dark-skinned hunter-gatherers could not be responsibly included.<sup>12</sup>

All of these issues were addressed by shifting the focus of the curriculum further away from history and social evolution and toward human and animal behavioral psychology. Thus, under Bruner’s guidance, the final curriculum began by studying the life cycles of salmon and the social behaviors of herring gulls and baboons, before moving on, in the fourth and final segment of the curriculum to consider humans, of whom the central example were Netsilik Inuit. The Netsilik Film Series, then, had to bear the weight of addressing a potentially huge range of issues related to human difference in the context of a racially charged political moment. And yet at least some of the MACOS collaborators had a great deal of confidence in this material’s efficacy in addressing complex racial and cultural issues. As Balikci, the ethnographer in charge of creating the Netsilik materials, recalled with some vehemence, “We were firmly convinced, that . . . with the Eskimo materials at the center of the program, we would be able to effectively oppose racism and ethnocentrism in America. We really believed it.”<sup>13</sup>

MACOS was organized around a set of very broad, framing questions that emphasized the underlying unity of human beings in the context of cultural and other kinds of diversity: "What is human about human beings? How did they get that way? How can they be made more so?" Broken down a bit more, the framing questions included such issues as the following: How are humans behaviorally different from other animals? What are the commonalities, the "tragic invariances," and biological imperatives with which all humans must grapple, irrespective of culture? How do specific cultures address these imperatives of environment and biology? What is the function of cultural adaptations? How does cultural change happen? How are societies structured? What are the possible futures of humanity?<sup>14</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/2.Structure-and-Function-Susan-Hegeman-1.jpg> >

Figure 2. Cover of student booklet, "Structure and Function" (Educational Development Center, 1970), <http://www.macosonline.org/booklets/Structure%20and%20Function.pdf> < <http://www.macosonline.org/booklets/Structure%20and%20Function.pdf> > .

Despite these questions' putative open-endedness, some early critics of MACOS immediately detected the ideological premises behind them. As the educational

philosopher Maxine Greene wryly noted of the MACOS developers, "This sounds like they have the answers."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is easy to see in MACOS's framing the disciplinary agendas characteristic of mid-century anthropology, sociology, and behavioral psychology, including structuralism, functionalism, biological determinism, and human and social developmentalism. But further, we might simply note that MACOS's framing questions foreclosed various other approaches to the topic of humanity, not least views about the special or divinely ordained nature of human existence. And by extension, such frames of thinking seemed to subvert the social religion of American nationalism, by which the American nation was understood to have a special, or exceptional identity and destiny among other nations. In its place, MACOS introduced the ideas of historical complexity and even relativism. And as for the question, "How can they [humans] be made more so?," its potential utopianism is rather obviously counterbalanced by suggestions of social engineering. It is here where we may begin to understand some of the sources of the backlash against MACOS.

Outrage over the MACOS curriculum began in 1970 in Lake City, a small Florida town near the Florida-Georgia border. There, a Baptist minister named Don Glenn, who encountered MACOS via his sixth-grade daughter, formed a group to examine the curriculum called Citizens for Moral Education. They soon concluded that MACOS promoted "sex education, evolution, a 'hippie-yippie philosophy,' gun control, and communism."<sup>16</sup> From there, things followed in what now seems like a familiar course: hearings were held at which outraged parents yelled at school board members, who tepidly defended the curriculum, whereupon a bureaucratic decision was made to allow students to opt out of taking the MACOS course if they so wished. Soon after, the curriculum was dropped entirely. But this was not before a significant number of teachers, parents, and students in Lake City actively and even defiantly defended the curriculum. One teacher, who was also a Baptist minister, publicly engaged the Reverend Glenn's accusations that the curriculum was immoral. He and twenty-one of his colleagues also drafted a strongly-worded letter of protest to the school board over the ruling on MACOS on the grounds that it violated their academic freedom.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, some of the teachers supported the MACOS curriculum precisely because they saw it as addressing a pressing local concern. Like many southern communities in 1970, Lake City was under court order to desegregate its schools, and some educators expressed the hope that the MACOS curriculum's emphasis on the commonality of humanity might play some role in easing racial tensions. For them, MACOS was a tool of anti-racist education.

It would be tempting to see the MACOS controversy as simply a proxy war in the larger battle over federally mandated desegregation: a stand-in for what some communities came to see as the wider federal imposition on their local authority over education. Yet even the heated context of school desegregation does not suffice to explain the vehemence of the MACOS controversy, which ultimately extended well beyond the segregated South, animating parent groups in Arizona, Washington State, and New Hampshire. The final straw for MACOS was in April of 1975, when it became an issue in congressional debates over federal appropriations for the National Science Foundation itself. There, Arizona Republican Congressman John B. Conlan, Jr. introduced an amendment that would prohibit the NSF from using funds to promote *any* activities related to curriculum development without congressional oversight. Though the language of the

amendment was deliberately general, in part to avoid accusations of censorship, the explicit aim was to shut down MACOS. Conlan complained that he and his colleagues had been “inundated with outraged complaints nationwide” about MACOS, which he portrayed as an “insidious” attempt by the federal government to institute national educational standards. Linking Bruner to his controversial Harvard colleague, the behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner, Conlan asserted that MACOS’s real goal was to “mold children’s social attitudes and beliefs along lines that set them apart and alienate them from the beliefs and moral values of their parents and local communities.”<sup>18</sup> He then embarked on a decontextualized tour of the MACOS materials to give evidence for his claim that the curriculum promoted behavior such as “adultery and wife-swapping,” cannibalism, female infanticide, “divorce and trial marriage,” murder, senilicide, and “surveillance.”<sup>19</sup> He also complained that the Netsilik films, in particular, “contain many lurid and gory scenes of Eskimos killing and butchering animals they hunt. Children are shown scenes of Eskimos eating the eyeballs and other organs of slaughtered animals, and drinking warm blood.”<sup>20</sup>

In debate, Democratic Representative James W. Symington of Missouri wondered if it was really such a bad thing for children to be exposed to the realities as the killing and slaughtering of animals for food: “When I was a boy working on my grandfather’s farm, I used to see how they dispatched hogs before the bacon could be made available. Nothing I saw in that film [*At the Caribou Crossing Place*] exceeded the severity of that operation.”<sup>21</sup> Congressman Richard Ottinger, a Democrat from New York, pointed out that Conlan had cherry-picked his examples of the bad behavior allegedly being modeled in the MACOS curriculum from sources that were clearly identified as fictional or mythological. He wondered facetiously if “Little Red Riding Hood” also promoted bestiality, and expressed concern about the Bible as a proper text for children, given its tales of murder, polygamy, and infanticide.<sup>22</sup> Conlan’s amendment was narrowly defeated, largely on the grounds that it would have turned Congress into a de facto curriculum review board, but the damage was done nevertheless. The battle led to a cascade of further legislation and hearings, the ultimate result of which was that the NSF withdrew further funding not only from MACOS but from its long-standing mission of funding curriculum projects in general. Moreover, the public controversy effectively killed any further sales of the MACOS curriculum to school districts, leading to its demise.<sup>23</sup>

The dramatic rise and fall of MACOS has been widely discussed among historians of education in terms of “failure”—of the perhaps over-ambitious pedagogical aspirations of the curriculum itself, and of the research academics’ failure to appreciate the multiple constraints on teachers, school boards, and school administrators. Even more commonly, the MACOS episode has been portrayed as a hubristic failure among the curriculum’s creators to properly grasp the complexity of the politics of schooling in the United States, where governance is uneasily dispersed across national, state, local, and even familial levels.<sup>24</sup> But more fundamentally, the “failure” of MACOS may be seen as resulting from a deep conflict over education’s role in fulfilling the imperatives of the United States’ Cold War anti-totalitarian politics. The architects of MACOS, denizens of research universities, promoted cultural tolerance and a meritocratic conception of scientifically oriented pursuits and modes of thinking as necessary skills for opposing totalitarianism. Meanwhile, the opponents of MACOS conceived of themselves as engaged in an anti-totalitarian mission, albeit of a more populist kind. Focused on opposing communism, they

emphasized the significance of religious faith, conventional morality, the local authority of family and community, and a nationalist belief in the exceptional destiny of the United States as a beacon of freedom to the world. With this ideological conflict in mind, it may be possible to see MACOS's demise not so much in terms of various failures of vision on the part of its creators than as a victim of what would, by the end of the twentieth century, be known as culture wars.

## The MACOS Culture War

Culture wars—currently exemplified by recent conflicts over teaching critical race theory, the removal of monuments celebrating the Confederacy, or the banning of transgender athletes from girls' sports—are now a familiar feature of American politics.<sup>25</sup> But the idea of a culture war is not without some controversy, particularly if we return to the moment of the idea's articulation in the decades around the turn of the millennium. Thomas Frank famously described the culture war over abortion as largely a political tactic, deployed by political conservatives to entice the working class to vote against their material self-interests. Others, such as James Davidson Hunter and Andrew Hartman, have portrayed culture wars as more complex *cultural* struggles over ideological, religious, and historical fissures in American society.<sup>26</sup> The MACOS example can help us see that in this crucial moment in the history of American conservatism, a culture war could be both: a tactic for building political coalitions *and* a pitched battle over deep divisions over the shape and future of American culture.

Rick Perlstein offers support for the idea that the MACOS culture war was a central event in the development of what would become the Reagan-era conservative coalition of values voters and free-market ideologues. He argues that the controversy over MACOS only became a national phenomenon through the power of an “emerging conservative infrastructure” with roots in Barry Goldwater's failed presidential run in 1964.<sup>27</sup> The national public outcry over MACOS that Conlan was able to invoke on the floor of Congress was the direct product of conservative political operative Richard Viguerie's new political direct mailing strategies and the propaganda efforts of the Heritage Foundation, recently founded and funded by beer magnate Joseph Coors to meld an older model of conservative think tanks to outright political activism and advocacy.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it was through morally-tinged social controversies like those over MACOS that the Heritage Foundation found its mission and helped determine the shape of modern American conservatism. That is to say, with the MACOS controversy and others like it, a conservative movement largely dominated by business interests learned how to use social controversies, along with mass marketing, to consolidate its political base.

But any account of this strategy would be incomplete without also explaining the specific appeal of the MACOS controversy as an issue for social conservatives, who were, in fact, undergoing their own kind of political crisis. During the early years of the Cold War, religious and social conservatives were relatively comfortably incorporated into a nationalist political narrative that presented communism as the central threat to both Christianity and an implicitly Christian American way of life. Yet with the Civil Rights Act

and other challenges to local autonomy emanating from the courts and federal government, the increasingly powerful and vocal religious conservatives shifted their focus of animus to the perceived excessive—indeed, totalitarian—power of government itself. This is exemplified in the Reverend Glenn’s associative chain that linked MACOS to sex education, evolution, gun control, communism, and “hippie-yippie philosophy.” On the face of it, these are strange linkages. In no way did MACOS touch on gun control. Nor did it significantly address sex education, except possibly for a unit on “Life Cycles,” which focused as much on salmon as it did on humans.<sup>29</sup> Even evolution was treated somewhat circumspectly in the course design—not out of concerns over potential religious controversy but over worries about inadvertently introducing social Darwinist views. However, these ideas had conceptual coherence for Glenn and his fellow religious conservatives who drew a clear connection between the curriculum’s frankly humanist and anti-exceptionalist perspective and a perceived threat to “states’ rights,” American national identity, and patriarchal authority. Put another way, MACOS, sex education, evolution, and gun control—and, of course, federally-mandated desegregation—were all seen as de facto “communist,” in that they implied something like a totalitarian imposition of state control, and thus were arrayed against what was understood to be a fundamentally Christian American way of life.

Soon, and with direct reference to MACOS, a name would coalesce around this perceived totalitarian assault on religiously authorized patriarchal control: “secular humanism.” To this day, almost a half-century after the height of the MACOS controversy, the website of televangelist Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) continues to cite MACOS as a scary example of the federal government’s efforts to “indoctrinate young children into the teachings of humanism.”<sup>30</sup> “Secular humanism” would become the conservative justification for white flight into Christian schools in the era of desegregation. It would also be linked to everything from declining test scores and the new math in education, to a vast array of social ills and horrors including crime and suicide, women’s equality, gay rights, reproductive rights, environmentalism, disarmament, wealth redistribution, and “one-world government.”<sup>31</sup>

In sum, the MACOS controversy helped define “secular humanism,” the central domestic opponent of the fundamentalist Christian agenda, in a moment of ideological crisis for the right: when it was hard to oppose massive impositions of federal authority like desegregation without being accused of racism, and when the power of the old ideological opponent of Soviet communism was on the wane and had not yet found its substitute in militant Islam. In this way, the MACOS culture war aided in the political ascendancy of the modern religious right; in particular, the kind of Dominionism promoted by Pat Robertson and others, with its strong emphasis on blind authority, militant nationalism, and violent millennial fantasies.

## On Eating Eyeballs and the Politics of Disgust

It is no coincidence that so many culture war controversies involve children and education. Contests over children and their upbringing implicitly address deep anxieties about futurity

and changes in social values, symbols, and ideas.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, like a melodrama, a good political controversy needs a perceived imperiled, and innocent, victim. It was perhaps for this reason that Conlan and his supporters argued not only that MACOS taught improper things, but that it physically imperiled children. Specifically, it may be recalled, Conlan claimed that the Netsilik Film Series assaulted children with gory and offensive scenes of hunting, killing, butchering animals, and eating things that many Americans in the 1970s might have found disgusting. This concern is in some ways the opposite of the absurd suggestion that MACOS was promoting or teaching practices like “wife swapping” or cannibalism. While those worries rested on a somewhat magical belief that the mere mention of something in textual form—regardless of context—would provoke imitation in children, the films, on the other hand, were faulted for arousing visceral repulsion: the children, it was alleged, were being forced to experience things that naturally and rightly sickened them. I will take this issue as an opportunity to look more closely at the Netsilik Film Series, since that is the source of this alleged peril, and also to begin to think about why the MACOS material was, at least for some, not simply ideologically dangerous, but needed to be couched in terms of repulsion and disgust.

There are nine films altogether in the Netsilik Film Series, divided, when necessary, into half-hour parts: *At the Caribou Crossing Place*; *At the Spring Sea Ice Camp*; *At the Autumn River Camp*; *At the Winter Sea Ice Camp*; *Building a Kayak*; *Fishing at the Stone Weir*; *Group Hunting on the Spring Ice*; *Jigging for Lake Trout*; and *Stalking Seal on Spring Ice*.<sup>33</sup> Altogether, they follow a Netsilik couple and their small child through a year’s worth of traditional activities, including seal and caribou hunting, ice fishing, making *quajait* (kayaks) and *igluit* (igloos), fixing a stone weir and using it to catch fish, playing traditional games, and preparing and eating traditional foods. A great deal of attention is paid to arctic scenery, weather, and wildlife, and the child’s perspective is especially emphasized as a kind of viewpoint character for the audience. The films deploy no voice-over narrative, no subtitles, no musical soundtrack; the audio consists solely of ambient natural noise and the voices of the actors, who speak and sometimes sing in their native language, Natsilingmiutut. The only extra-diegetic explanatory material is a scrolling intertitle imposed over a shot of a globe that gradually focuses in on Nunavut at the beginning of all the films.

The absence of other explanatory supports in the films such as narration or subtitles was deliberate, and again goes back to MACOS’s pedagogical strategies. Greatly concerned that the films not be viewed passively or uncritically, Bruner wanted to immerse students as closely as possible in the experiential position of the ethnographer; the films were to serve as the source material for course discussions and activities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, he turned to the modernist repertoire of techniques of filmic estrangement. On the advice of the linguist Roman Jakobson, Bruner went so far as to consider imposing on the Netsilik footage the radical editing techniques of Alain Resnais’s 1961 film *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*.<sup>34</sup> Though such avant-garde experimentation was soon abandoned in favor of more conventional techniques, the elimination of narration and translation as a strategy for provoking estrangement and active watching became central not only to the film’s pedagogical mission but to its status as a groundbreaking ethnographic and educational film. It anticipates similar strategies used in another well-known Indigenous Arctic film, Isuma Igloodik’s, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (dir. Zacharias Kunuk 2001). *Atanarjuat* is not



a documentary, and it does use subtitles to translate the dialogue, which is solely in Inuktitut. But like the Netsilik films, it forgoes narrative over-voice and non-diegetic sound, in a similar attempt to disrupt passive watching.

In other ways, however, the Netsilik films are not groundbreaking. In the 2004 documentary film, *Through these Eyes* (dir. Charles Laird), which interviews some of the performers in the Netsilik film series, we learn that at the time of the filming, the Pelly Bay community, as it was then called, was undergoing some rapid and culturally transformative changes. Sidonie Nirlungayak, a performer in the Netsilik film series, reports going fishing with her family in 1967, the year the films were released, and coming back to find the village, and subsequently her life, wholly altered by the presence of newly built wooden houses.<sup>35</sup> Yet the films were situated in a precontact ethnographic present. Except for the occasional “anachronisms” there is no indication in the film series that the Netsilik had access to cloth, metal implements, or guns.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, every film in the series begins with a contextualizing scrolling intertitle, which establishes this ethnographic present as follows: “Because of their almost inaccessible location the Netsilik, the People of the Seal, were virtually the last of the Eskimo groups to abandon the nomadic life of the arctic hunter. As late as 1923 the Danish explorer, Knud Rasmussen, reported that numerous Netsilik had never seen a white man. In the early 1960s the People of the Seal still remembered vividly the old nomadic ways. Thus a minimum of reconstruction was required to film the traditional life of the Netsilik.”<sup>37</sup> At the outset of each film, in other words, the Netsilik material is framed as historically, geographically, and culturally remote from an America undergoing the political upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s. Netsilik Inuit are confined to an eternal temporality sometime before 1923—that is, to roughly the date of the release of *Nanook of the North*.

And yet, for MACOS's critics at the highest national levels, this invocation of distance was disrupted by a visceral sense of proximity and danger. George Archibald, Conlan's press secretary who spearheaded his boss's crusade against MACOS, asserted that he knew of cases of American children who were physically sickened by scenes such as one of a little boy eating a fish eyeball.<sup>38</sup> Interviews with adults who had seen the Netsilik films as children did confirm that some of the more gore-filled representations of hunting and butchering made a big impression on them, though many recalled being more titillated than disturbed.<sup>39</sup> But it is particularly hard to fathom that the scene with the fish eyeball in particular created the visceral horror that Conlan and company tried to attach to it. The scene, in Part One of *Fishing at the Stone Weir*, presents a woman gutting freshly caught fish in preparation for drying. As she cuts and cleans the fish, she offers little tidbits of raw meat, including an eyeball, to her small boy. Though the camera doesn't linger on the boy's response to this food, we do get a short glimpse of him appreciatively, almost thoughtfully, chewing.<sup>40</sup>

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< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/3.child-eating-fish-eye-Susan-Hegeman.jpg> >

Figure 3. A child eats a raw fish eyeball, *Fishing at the Stone Weir, Part 1*, directed by Quentin Brown (1967; Education Development Center and National Film Board of Canada), loc. 26:43, [https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing\\_at\\_stone\\_weir\\_pt\\_1](https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing_at_stone_weir_pt_1) < [https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing\\_at\\_stone\\_weir\\_pt\\_1](https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing_at_stone_weir_pt_1) > .

This short scene can be effectively compared to one in *Nanook of the North*, in which Nanook (played by Allariallak) and his family visit the trading post. There, Nanook's children are given a treat of lard and sea biscuit to eat. But after one child, Allegoo, develops a stomachache, the trader gives him a big medicinal dose of castor oil. To the likely surprise and amusement of the film's audience—especially its original 1920s audience, who would have immediately recognized castor oil as a medicine widely hated by children—the camera lingers on the happy, smiling child licking castor oil from his lips with obvious relish. The viewer is prompted to find the scene both cute and funny. In *Nanook*, the surprise the audience might register at the Inuk child's tastes is comically redirected into a point of connection in the recognition of his evident pleasure.<sup>41</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/4.Allegoo-drinking-castor-oil-Susan-Hegeman.jpg> >

Figure 4. Nanook's son Allegoo enjoys castor oil, *Nanook of the North*, directed by Robert Flaherty (1922; Pathé), loc. 15:19, <https://vimeo.com/42775802> < <https://vimeo.com/42775802> > ).

On the surface, the scene where the boy eats the fish eyeball is very similar: a child readily eats something that may be widely regarded as disgusting by his audience. Yet, in keeping with the filmmaking strategy of the Netsilik series in general, we are not similarly cued to find this scene particularly touching or funny, or particularly disgusting. It neither invites the closeness of identification nor the distance of revulsion. In fact, it comes to seem completely quotidian, especially as it is one of many scenes in the films involving hunting, fishing, and preparing and eating food. It is also similar to other closeups of this and other children engaging with the natural world—as, for example, when a child plays with a butterfly.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the teachers' guide encourages teachers to ask students who are disgusted by this scene to explain (and therefore think about) their reaction. It also suggests sharing the story of a French traveler who gradually overcame his initial disgust with Inuit food and eventually embraced it as a delicacy.<sup>43</sup> The pedagogical message here seems to be that eating fish eyeballs is within the range of things that people do: nothing more, nothing less, and certainly nothing to be sickened by.

The pedagogical plan, in other words, was entirely in keeping with the MACOS agenda to normalize the activities of the Netsilik as fundamentally within the range of human

behaviors, and ultimately to stress the commonality of humankind. But in the context of the postwar United States, there were some very explicit reasons why this seemingly anodyne pedagogical point could go so politically awry. Interestingly, it was Margaret Mead, the doyenne and public face of anthropology in America, who may have gotten most economically to the pedagogical—and political—issue. Hoping to enlist her in the cause of defending MACOS in congressional hearings, Peter Dow, director of the MACOS project, explained to Mead that the course was being criticized because, among other things, it included a story about an old woman who was abandoned by her family to die. Mead replied, “What do you tell the children that for?” Dow then asked her how she would defend MACOS before Congress. Mead replied quickly and firmly: “You tell them what they want to hear. You point out that the reason we teach about Eskimos is to help children understand the differences between our culture and theirs, that we have choices they don’t have. You tell them that we have the wheat fields of Kansas and the oil fields of Texas, that we are a culture of abundance, not scarcity, and we don’t have to leave our old people behind to die on the ice like the Eskimos—if we choose not to.”<sup>44</sup> Mead, a canny actor, long used to the limelight and to the complex business of conducting anthropological work at the government’s behest, probably understood political gamesmanship better than the MACOS organizers. But she also may have intuited something about postwar political ideology that had also escaped them: that the liberal notion of the “democratic personality,” which enshrined the value of individual and cultural difference within the social body, was vulnerable to the way that difference could be mobilized as alien, intolerable, disgusting, and un-American. Though the Netsilik community was chosen as an ethnographic example precisely because of its seeming distance from contemporary American social conflicts, this very distance could be used against it, as an example of unassimilable, intolerable alienness. Or at least, that’s what Conlan hoped.

Conlan’s own political career was not markedly helped by his crusade against MACOS. Derided in the national press as a fringe candidate “whose standard speech connects Eskimos to a world socialist plot,” Conlan lost an ugly primary race for Senate to Sam Steiger, a fellow pro-development Republican (Steiger, in turn, lost the general election to Democrat Dennis DeConcini).<sup>45</sup> But why did Conlan even think that, of all the issues to run on, the MACOS controversy would turn Arizona voters out for him? In a state with a large Native American population and vast reservations that stood outside of state jurisdiction, Conlan was likely betting on both racial animus and on Western sentiments, not unrelated to those of Southern segregationists, that the federal government interfered in local relations between dominant and minority populations. Of course, Conlan would later emphatically dismiss suggestions that his attack on MACOS had anything to do with his own views of Native Americans: “I had a very sympathetic feeling for Indians to try and give them a chance if they would like to come into Western civilization. If they didn’t, that’s their choice. But we found the Netsilik tribe, at least as portrayed in this program, is extremely primitive. Too primitive a society to say this should be an example for our students to follow.”<sup>46</sup>

Here, Conlan clarifies several points about his concerns about both MACOS and the Netsilik series. Centrally, Conlan asserts that the Netsilik were “too primitive” to serve as educational models. While the MACOS creators saw their goal as one of producing a

detached and objective (and tolerant) understanding of human diversity, Conlan and company portrayed MACOS's pedagogical goal as one of trying to make American students identify with, and perhaps even emulate, pre-contact Inuit. Though this suggestion may seem farfetched, it does make sense of his argument that MACOS was alienating children from their culture and the authority of their parents. Conlan also makes clear his preference for Indigenous people to "come into Western civilization," an assimilationist imperative that, while compatible with his own evangelical Christianity, works against the ideology of the Netsilik films. But this comment also takes on special resonance in the light of events in Arizona, and in much of the desert Southwest, at the time that Conlan was in Congress (1973–77). The remote Four Corners region, where Arizona's northeast corner touches Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado, was at the time undergoing rapid industrialization. Ultimately, six power plants—two nuclear and four coal-burning—would be built in the region to serve the energy demands of booming southwestern cities, including Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Phoenix, parts of which were in Conlan's district. The power plants, in turn, were located in this region to take advantage of their proximity to the vast untapped reserves of high-quality coal located in Dziłfjiiin (translated from Navajo as "Black Mountain," this area is also known as Black Mesa). However, the developers of this region were presented with a significant obstacle: Dziłfjiiin was part of the Navajo and Hopi Nations, and was occupied by a few hundred Hopi and many thousands of Diné (Navajo) sheepherders.

The extrication of mineral and water resources from Native American control required a complex act of "legal theft."<sup>47</sup> Very powerful regional interests including Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater seized upon a decades-old border dispute between the Navajo and Hopi Nations, and worked to resolve the dispute in the Hopi's favor, with the unprecedented requirement that Diné be resettled off what was now designated Hopi land. They then took advantage of political conflicts internal to the Hopi Nation to install a tribal government that favored ceding the land to use by Peabody Coal Company, a subsidiary of the politically powerful Kennecott and Bechtel corporations. Dziłfjiiin (Black Mesa) would become the site of the largest strip-mining operation in the United States and site of the world's first coal-slurry pipeline, a massively water-intensive technology that piped coal directly to the power plants. Despite the significant air- and groundwater pollution from the mines and power plants, and despite the forcible confiscation of their sheep, many Diné defiantly resisted removal.

With the help of corporate public relations, Goldwater and his pro-development allies portrayed the ensuing unrest as a "range war" between the cooperative Hopi and some unruly Diné, fostered by a few outside agitators "pouring kerosene on the old flames of tribal hatred and revenge."<sup>48</sup> But the fault lines resided less between Diné and Hopi, many of whom had coexisted for decades, than between citizens of both nations and their respective allies, including corporate and industrial interests on the one hand, and environmentalists and pan-Native activists on the other.<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, the battle over Dziłfjiiin (Black Mesa) would do much to cement a long-term popular association between Indigenous activism and environmentalism.<sup>50</sup> Among the well-known environmentalists involved in the battle over Dziłfjiiin (Black Mesa) were writers Edward Abbey and Gary Snyder, both of whom in various ways merged their

environmentalism with spirituality derived from Indigenous sources.<sup>51</sup> Abbey's 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, about a group of anarchist saboteurs on a mission to save the Four Corners region from despoliation—prominent among their targets was the “kraken” of power generation centered at Dziłjiiin (Black Mesa)—is often cited as having offered a model of activism for radical environmentalist groups like Earth First!<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, comparing the strip mining of Dziłjiiin (Black Mesa) to a “cancer . . . eating away at the breast of Mother Earth,” Snyder famously envisioned a “new-old” American identity that embraced both Indigenous thought and environmentalism, writing, “Black Mesa speaks to us through an ancient, complex web of myth. She is sacred territory. To hear her voice is to give up the European word ‘America’ and accept the new-old name for the continent, ‘Turtle Island.’”<sup>53</sup>

This context belies Conlan's comment about some Indigenous people being “too primitive” to serve as role models. He had very real grounds to worry not only about Diné resistance to relocation, but about non-Indigenous others being inspired to support and join their cause. The kind of environmentalist activism and spirituality emerging from the coalition of actors at Dziłjiiin (Black Mesa) directly challenged not only corporate extraction interests, but law and order, Christianity, US sovereignty, and even the identity of “America” itself. Indeed, in this light, it is possible to see Conlan's pedagogical concerns as accurate. Perhaps, as Snyder suggested, there was “a generation of white people finally ready to learn from the [Indigenous] Elders.” Perhaps MACOS, and especially the Netsilik material, was a danger precisely because it would have potential not only to teach children things that Conlan found “disgusting,” but things entirely unimagined even by the architects of the MACOS curriculum themselves.

## Arctic Pedagogy

The MACOS conflict has largely been discussed as a battle over education and curriculum in the conventional sense, one whose setting is schools. But as Snyder suggested, education, as a process of transmission from person to person and generation to generation, happens in a variety of settings of which school is only the most formal. Indeed, in the context of the battle over Dziłjiiin (Black Mesa), it is easy to see how political organizing and activism became forms of intercultural education. This is a particularly important point to make in the context of Indigenous people, for whom the history of education is often dominated by the story of forced enculturation into dominant societies through formal schooling. In the United States and Canada, this story is usually told with reference to the residential boarding schools that often brutally separated Indigenous children from their families, communities, languages, and traditions.<sup>54</sup> But it is obvious that, long before there were boarding schools, Indigenous people taught and learned complex knowledges of the natural world, cosmology, geography, kinship, governance, religious belief, myriad technologies of construction, agriculture, warfare, medicine, and much more, using a variety of pedagogical practices that included storytelling, role playing, and games.<sup>55</sup> For Inuit, *inunnguiniq*, “the making of a human being,” involves not just the teaching of valuable skills and knowledge, but the transmission from Elders to children of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*, both a worldview and “an ethical framework and

detailed plan for having a good life.”<sup>56</sup> As K. Tsianina Lomawaima powerfully insists, schooling is not the same as education, and there is a difference between education of native people and education *by and for* native people.<sup>57</sup> For Indigenous people to self-consciously claim education in this fuller sense is to engage in what Daniel Wildcat calls “intellectual sovereignty.”<sup>58</sup>

Designed to be used in a school curriculum, the Netsilik Film Series was an educational text in the conventional sense. But I would like to explore another possibility for these films, namely that they be considered from the perspective of informal pedagogy as well, and indeed as participating in an Indigenous educational practice. Though they were not in control of the pedagogical apparatus within which the films were made and used, and therefore not exercising intellectual sovereignty in the fullest sense, we can nevertheless consider Netsilik Inuit who performed in the films as more than ethnographic subjects. We can also see them as *teachers*.

There is, in fact, some precedent for interpreting Inuit actors in this way, by returning once again to *Nanook of the North*. Though it has been rightly criticized as imperialist, manipulative, and romantic in its portrayal of Inuit, *Nanook* is nevertheless remarkable for the degree to which it anticipated more contemporary practices of participatory ethnographic filmmaking. Inuit participants watched and commented upon film rushes, offered up suggestions for what to film, and even undertook some technical tasks. Director Robert Flaherty conceded that unlike other films, which relied on plot and character, the interest of *Nanook* lay in the drama of survival and in the display of his performers’ mastery of their environment. In demonstrating his prowess as a hunter or in crafting an igloo, we may also say that Allakariallak, the performer who played Nanook, was also a teacher, whose students included Flaherty and his cameramen, but also quite plausibly other members of his current and future community. Indeed, *Nanook of the North* has been used by Inuit as an archive of information about their cultural practices and as a source of cultural pride.<sup>59</sup> As such, *Nanook* serves as a kind of necessary precondition for more recent films like the internationally acclaimed *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, produced by an all-Inuit cast and crew, using only Inuktitut language, and developed through a community-based process that incorporated the skills and stories of elders. *Atanarjuat* and other films by the Isuma Igloodik Productions Company represent a clear turn toward filmmaking by and for the Indigenous community itself, an example of what Michelle H. Raheja calls “visual sovereignty.”<sup>60</sup>

In this trajectory of Arctic Indigenous filmmaking, from *Nanook* to *Atanarjuat* and beyond, the Netsilik Film Series could seem to be yet another example of a colonialist ethnographic filmmaking practice that diminishes the contemporary presence of Netsilik people, and largely serves the interests of the ethnographers and MACOS curriculum designers. Though the innovative use of sound allows for some open-endedness in interpretation, the effect is still one of treating the actors as objects of study, fixed in the amber of a life lived before contact. But there is another way to think about these films that puts the issue of relative visual sovereignty in a different light. We can reconceptualize all of these works in relation to teaching and see the efforts of Inuit participants as acts of “intellectual sovereignty.”



Reflecting on her involvement as an actress in the Netsilik films, Sidonie Nirlungayak recalls having firmly rejected the assertion by the southern filmmakers that they were recording a disappearing way of life. Though she later seems to have reevaluated that idea, at the time of the filming she was clear that "this was how I lived every day. I mean these things were part of our lives, and had been since I was a child."<sup>61</sup> Another performer, Guy Kakkianiun, reiterates this idea that what he was doing in the Netsilik films was capturing everyday life. He remembers happening upon the filming of *Fishing at the Stone Weir* and joining in on the activity being filmed for the simple reason that he needed fish to feed his dogs: "Even though I was acting in the film, it was the real thing for me."<sup>62</sup>

Why would it seem important to them to insist that what they were showing was the "real thing"? One possible answer is revealed in *Fishing at the Stone Weir*, which offers extensive footage of two men spearing fish. Intercut with this footage are scenes of a child using a small spear of his own to catch fish, imitating and learning how to do the work of his elders. Through editing, the filmmakers themselves conveyed the idea that this was a pedagogical scene, in which the observers—the Netsilik child, the filmmakers, and the children who would be watching the film in southern classrooms alike—were learning through the ancient practices of observation and imitation. Indeed, Joe Karetak and Frank Tester confirm that "Inuit children learn by seeing and doing. Their roles and responsibilities—present and future—were defined and visible to them in the daily and seasonal routines of Inuit camp life."<sup>63</sup> In other words, representing the techniques and routines of life was both a demonstration of the mastery of skills and information and an act of transmitting this knowledge to others. Small wonder, then, that on hearing about the MACOS controversy many years later, one of the Netsilik performers, Barthelemy Nirlungayak, expressed both incomprehension and a fairly personal kind of hurt: "What those people down south say never surprises me. They don't know us. The fact is, that's just how we lived."<sup>64</sup>

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<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/5.Child-spear-fishing-Susan-Hegeman.jpg>


















Figure 5. Child imitates the fisherman, *Fishing at the Stone Weir, Part 1*, directed by Quentin Brown (1967; Education Development Center and National Film Board of Canada), loc. 26:43, [https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing\\_at\\_stone\\_weir\\_pt\\_1](https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing_at_stone_weir_pt_1) < [https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing\\_at\\_stone\\_weir\\_pt\\_1](https://www.nfb.ca/film/fishing_at_stone_weir_pt_1)> .











For the MACOS creators, Netsilik Inuit provided a case study of a common humanity in the context of cultural difference. For its critics, they presented a far more intimate encounter with a threatening alterity. For the Netsilik performers, however, a more generous kind of intimacy may well have been at play—an effort to show and transmit to others the essential skill and knowledge for “having a good life.” Sadly, the real “failure” of the MACOS curriculum may well have been the inability to recognize *this* pedagogy.





















## Notes

1. Peter Dow, *Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons from the Sputnik Era* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 1999), 134, 169; “Man: A Course of Study” (Washington DC: Curriculum Development Associates, 1971), 1, <http://macosonline.org/guides/MACOS%20brochure.pdf> < <http://macosonline.org/guides/MACOS%20brochure.pdf>> .
2. Rick Perlstein, *Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 449.
3. A note on terminology: “Inuit,” which means “the people” in Inuktitut, refers to the diverse Indigenous Peoples who traditionally inhabit the circumpolar Arctic, of which Netsilik Inuit are but one group. The colonialist term “Eskimo,” which is now increasingly in disuse, is retained only in the context of historical quotations.



4. Founded in 1990, Igloodik Isuma Productions produces films, television, and internet material reflecting Inuit culture and language. They produced the award-winning trilogy of films *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (dir. Norman Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk 2006), and *Before Tomorrow* (dir. Marie-Hélène Cousineau < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-H%C3%A9l%C3%A8ne\\_Cousineau](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-H%C3%A9l%C3%A8ne_Cousineau)> and Madeline Ivalu < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeline\\_Ivalu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeline_Ivalu)> 2007). Isuma Productions, "About Us." <https://www.isuma.tv/isuma-productions/about> < <https://www.isuma.tv/isuma-productions/about>> . 
5. From its inception in 1950, the National Science Foundation has been actively involved in funding efforts to improve precollegiate science education and teacher training. By the 1960s, when the curricular reform movement was in full force, the NSF's educational reform mission extended to the social sciences as well. National Science Foundation, "Education: Lessons About Learning," <https://www.nsf.gov/about/history/nsf0050/pdf/education.pdf> < <https://www.nsf.gov/about/history/nsf0050/pdf/education.pdf>> ; and see Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 115–17; and Andrew Hartman, *Education and The Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). 
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11. Dow, *Schoolhouse Politics*, 66. 
12. Milam, "Public Science of the Savage Mind," 313. 
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## Commodifying Tragedy: Representing Violence against Native American Women in *The Cold Dish* and *Longmire*

by Cécile Heim | Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** By focusing on the representation of violence against Native American women in Craig Johnson's *The Cold Dish* and the television show *Longmire*, this article demonstrates how these cultural productions perpetuate settler-colonial power relations. Although *Longmire* is one of the more progressive shows thanks to its development of Native American characters and storylines, the settler-colonial status quo is affirmed in four main ways. Not only do the novel and TV show redeploy the racist stock characters of the Magical Indian and the White Savior, but the TV show especially also reiterates a version of the stereotypical Vanishing American narrative inherited from the Western genre. Furthermore, both cultural productions heavily pathologize the Cheyenne community, depriving them of agency. Finally, the novel and show both transform pain, suffering, and grief into transferable commodities. This allows them to disinvest the pain and tragedy suffered by the Native American characters in order to reinvest this tragic potential in white characters, which serves to reinforce the white characters' heroism. The commodification of tragic potential and emphasis on its sentimentalization help obscure the settler-colonial origins and systemic perpetuation of violence against Native American women. In sum, this analysis shows that the deeply ingrained and normalized settler-colonial ideology inherent to representational strategies limit the progressive potential of even the most benevolent and well-meaning white cultural productions.

**KEYWORDS** violence, representation, women, Indigenous studies, crime fiction

"I believe that whites do have a particular obligation to stand against racism. We are the ones who created racism, we are the ones who benefit from it, we are the ones who keep it going, and therefore we are the ones with the responsibility to end it. At the very least, this responsibility places the burden on white writers to avoid reproducing racist ideology in their fiction. It also means that whites should remain conscious of the racist foundations of their success when they appropriate the lives of people of color in order to sell books. It does not mean that white writers should avoid writing about characters of color. On the contrary, in fact, such avoidance also reproduces the racial status quo. It does mean that white writers of crime fiction need to be alert to the role that genre fiction plays in constructing and maintaining racial divides in the social world and to recognize their role in that process. It also means that readers, especially white readers, need to learn vigilance in reading in order to resist their own otherwise endless interpellation as complacent racists." – Maureen Reddy, *Traces, Codes, and Clues*<sup>1</sup>

Violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual people (henceforth 2SLGBTQQIA people) is one of the most destructive aspects of settler colonialism. This violence is disproportionately frequent and brutal in regions colonially called the United States and Canada. It is a historical as well as a contemporary situation, which reiterates and perpetuates North America's settler colonialism including the imposition of a hetero-patriarchal, capitalist, and white-supremacist system onto Indigenous lands and nations. As much in Canada as in the United States, scholars such as Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Seneca), Joanne Barker (Lenape), Sherene Razack (settler), Robyn Bourgeois (Cree), and Sarah Deer (Muscogee Cree), as well as NGOs, and grassroots organizations agree that this disproportionate violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people is a direct consequence of settler colonialism. In *Mark My Words*, Mishuana Goeman demonstrates how mapping practices and spatial strategies more in general frame, inform, and create the conditions for and the necessity of violence against Indigenous women and girls for the settler-colonial regime.<sup>2</sup> Other sources such as *Critically Sovereign*, edited by Joanne Barker; *Race, Space, and the Law*, edited by Sherene Razack, including, specifically, her chapter "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice"; Robyn Bourgeois's contribution to *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters*, "Generations of Genocide"; as well as Sarah Deer's landmark contribution to the field, *The Beginning and the End of Rape*<sup>7</sup> discuss how binary gender norms and gender violence are inherent to settler colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Similar conclusions on the central role of settler colonialism and settler governments in the creation of violence against Indigenous women have been drawn by such humanitarian and/or grassroots organizations as Amnesty International—specifically in their reports *Maze of Injustice* and *Stolen Sisters*—and the Native Women's Association of Canada, as well as, finally, by the Canadian National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls which published its final report, *Reclaiming Power and Place*, in June 2019.<sup>4</sup> They further agree that this state of increased vulnerability and precariousness is perpetuated by the settler-colonial states of Canada and the United States through inaction, inappropriate or negligent responses, systemic racism and sexism, and lack of due diligence.

Because violence against women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people is deeply anchored in settler-colonial ideology, its representation in white cultural productions is fraught with racial and colonial power. This article examines the representation of violence against Indigenous women in Craig Johnson's novel, *The Cold Dish* (2004), and the television show, *Longmire* (2012–2017).<sup>5</sup> While insisting that especially the television show offers complex Native American characters and storylines, which is unprecedented for such a popular show, this essay analyzes the innate and naturalized settler-colonial character of Indigenous people's representation in *The Cold Dish* and *Longmire*. Both cultural productions are particularly revealing of settler-colonial attitudes in their treatment of violence against Native American women. I argue that these cultural productions reinforce settler-colonial power relations by perpetuating damaging stereotypes of Indigenous people and commodifying the tragic potential ascribed to violence against Indigenous women for white profit.

White cultural productions often depict violence against Indigenous people in a way that reproduces settler-colonial values and power relations even when trying to include a more diverse range of representation and creating a space for Indigenous representations. Even worse, white cultural productions representing violence against Indigenous women, such as the TV show *Longmire* or the 2017 movie *Wind River* commodify the tragic potential of the depiction of the disproportionate violence perpetuated against Indigenous people.<sup>6</sup> As this article will show, this commodification serves to enhance white, mostly male, heroism. The show *Longmire* is based on Johnson's crime novels; *The Cold Dish* is the first of his Western-crime novels called the Walt Longmire series. Such literary and cultural genres as crime fiction and the Western, which Craig Johnson's work combines, are especially and deeply anchored in settler colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Even if crime fiction and TV shows are often dismissed as popular productions, *Longmire* and Johnson's Walt Longmire series have been internationally successful and have an important cultural outreach. The popularity and broad, international impact of these works is a testament to why it is important to understand and critique how their representations of violence against Indigenous women and girls does nothing to dismantle the settler-colonial values that produce this violence and only serves to reinforce white heroism and settler-colonial ideology.

This fraught representation is why, even today, Maureen Reddy's powerful words on the responsibility of white authors and readers in the epigraph still need recalling and implementing. In *Shaman or Sherlock*, one of the few studies on what authors Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald have termed "Native American crime fiction," they explain the success of fictional Native American detectives as a contemporary reiteration of "an old American theme: the Indian as a marginal figure on the border of civilization, a guide, an escort, or a companion into a darker and freer world, and sometimes a mentor or a guru who teaches a secret wisdom."<sup>8</sup> This book, along with Ray B. Browne's *Murder on the Reservation*,<sup>9</sup> examines two types of works of crime fiction, both of which, they argue, equally belong to the subgenre of "American Indian crime fiction." On the one hand, they mention Native American authors who write crime fiction, like Choctaw and Cherokee writer Louis Owens, Choctaw author LeAnne Howe, or Cherokee novelist Mardi Oakley Medawar.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, they include white writers, who use Native American characters or cultural heritage, like Tony Hillerman, Margaret Coel, or James D. Doss. These two studies uncritically merge two categories of texts by conflating forms of Native



American cultural expressions with representations of Native Americans that perpetuate cultural appropriation and reinforce damaging stereotypes. These stereotypes have emerged throughout the genocidal settler-colonial history of the United States, as is evident in Macdonald and Macdonald's description of the Native American detective.<sup>11</sup> By color-blindly focusing on generic adaptations of crime fiction, these critics hardly give any attention to the governing power relations at work when white authors exploit Native American cultural heritage for economic profit.

These naturalized stereotypes are deeply ingrained in US state-making narratives and policies that simultaneously build the nation and obscure the genocidal violence of nation-building processes. As Tiffany Lethabo King asserts in *The Black Shoals*, "This aspect of conquest, a violent and repetitive process of making the modern human through extinguishing Black and Indigenous life, is disavowed and willfully forgotten."<sup>12</sup> This intentional historical amnesia, repeatedly produced, of the fact that white personhood is built through genocide normalizes white supremacy and the existing exploitative dynamics that produce violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA today. These violences are constructed as something not out of the ordinary, to mention only one consequence of stereotypes.

In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria (Dakota) demonstrates the nationalist dynamics of the performance of stereotypes by exploring the ways in which white people have appropriated "Indianness" to construct "Americanness" from the Boston Tea Party to the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> He asserts that "in every instance, playing Indian represented, evaded, and perpetuated those relations [of dominated and dominator, or colonized and colonizer]. Indianness was the bedrock for creative American identities, but it was also one of the foundations (slavery and gender relations being two others) for imagining and performing domination and power in America."<sup>14</sup> Put differently, stereotypes of Indigenous people not only inform US settler identity, but the performance of them also serves to maintain settler-colonial power relations. In a similar vein, Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon affirm in *Screen Saviors* that such stock characters as the ethnic sidekick or the white savior serve to perpetuate white privilege as it "persists today largely through the symbolic labor of sincere fictions that attempt to efface the memory of the origins of white privilege [in genocide, slavery, and colonial rule] and to deny its continuing existence and appalling results."<sup>15</sup> By replacing real depictions of power relations with the stereotypes built into stock characters, these representational projects inform sociopolitical reality by affording support for white people seeking to maintain white power and to disavow the consequences of settler colonialism. In short, these representational strategies exert considerable violence.

This essay seeks to counter such color-blind literary criticism as in *Shaman or Sherlock* or *Murder on the Reservation* by providing a critical analysis of the appropriation of Native American cultural heritage, the creation of Native American characters, and the commodification of the tragic potential ascribed to violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, firstly, in Craig Johnson's *The Cold Dish* and, secondly, in the derived television show, *Longmire*. I hope that such an analysis contributes to avoiding and resisting the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes which participate in the maintenance of settler-colonial power relations and white supremacy in US society.

The previously mentioned studies by Browne and Macdonald and Macdonald as well as white crime fiction authors' exploitation of Native American cultural heritage are typical for what Jodi Melamed has described as neoliberal multiculturalism because of their emphasis on diversity without examination of racial and classist power relations. In *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Melamed describes this attitude to race and capitalist practices which deliberately erases the racial power relations reinforcing white supremacy, especially in literary criticism, to be typical for contemporary studies on "ethnic" fiction because "neoliberal multiculturalism has portrayed an ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism."<sup>16</sup> In other words, neoliberal multiculturalism not only obscures the fact that there is a direct connection between the colonial socioeconomic system, which presently allows and historically has allowed the US to thrive, and the exploitation of racialized bodies, but also implies its own form as the only possible anti-racism. The colonial socioeconomic system thus exploits racialized people for economic and political profit at the high costs of these racialized bodies while neoliberal multiculturalism veils the fact that capitalist modes of production are still racialized through its emphasis on diversity. The manner in which Native American characters are exploited in the novel and the show both contribute to this neoliberal multiculturalism through the commodification of emotions. More specifically, tragic or emotional potential ascribed to racialized bodies—in this case, Native American characters—and their tales of woe are extracted or dissociated from these characters in order to be reinvested for the profit of white characters who remain at the center of these cultural productions' melodrama.

This veiling of power relations is especially problematic when examining a genre such as crime fiction that engages with Native American cultures. This genre, along with the genre of the Western, has an explicitly racist past and is still largely dominated by white authors, which leads to an economic dynamic where white people profit from Native American cultural heritage. When white authors use Native American characters or cultures in their fiction, they end up prescribing, once again, what Native American culture is and how Native Americans behave. Crucially, the issue at stake is not one of authenticity, but rather how this dynamic of cultural production enables a perpetuation and reinforcement of settler practices, which emerged with captivity narratives as well as novels such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826).<sup>17</sup> The settler-colonial nature of these national narratives is an extension of the colonization of the North American continent intrinsic to the foundation of the United States.<sup>18</sup> The narratives studied here maintain racial, gendered, and classed power relations, particularly through exploiting Native Americans for profit, at the same time as they preserve oppressive representational practices and preclude sovereign, Indigenous self-representation.

## Obscuring the Settler-Colonial Roots of Violence in *The Cold Dish*

Violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people is a form of violence which is characterized by settler colonialism and shows settler understandings of and

attitudes toward law, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and nationality. Gender and sexual violence against Indigenous people crystallizes and epitomizes the settler-colonial project, including its successes and failures, as systemic forms of violence converge with intimate forms of violence pertaining to gender and sexual identities as well as the interruption of Indigenous kinship systems. Examining violence against women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people requires an intersectional and anti-colonial approach which considers the interaction of oppressive categories to explore the power relations at work that produce disproportionate violence against Indigenous people. However, without wanting to obscure violence against 2SLGBTQQIA people, this article focuses on violence against cisgender women who are survivors of heterosexual gender violence because its primary sources, *The Cold Dish* and *Longmire*, solely focus on this version of sexual violence. Of course, the absence of nonbinary gender identities and nonheterosexual sexual identities in these works testifies to a Euro-Western perspective which conceals Indigenous gender and sexual identities. In other words, this focus on heterosexual violence against cisgender women is a first instance that reveals how white cultural productions, which hardly ever stray away from binary gender norms and heteronormativity, perhaps inadvertently, reinforce settler-colonial values.

The protagonist of Johnson's *The Cold Dish*, Absaroka County Sheriff Walt Longmire, connects two different sexual assault cases to his investigation of the murder of Cody Pritchard. In this investigation, he is not only supported by the sheriff department's secretary, Ruby, and his deputies, Victoria Moretti, Jim Ferguson, and Turk Connally. But Walt is also significantly helped by his best friend, Henry Standing Bear, member of the Cheyenne nation and owner of a local bar called The Red Pony. Except for Turk Connally, these are all recurrent characters in the Walt Longmire series, which, to date, counts eighteen novels, two novellas, two collections of short stories, and which has spawned the TV show *Longmire*, all of which have generated significant commercial success.

Although the book series is multicultural in its attention to various ethnic minorities and Native American nations, it also regularly exploits Native American characters by employing stereotypes which profit solely the white hero. Johnson's stories feature diverse characters including from the Basque and Asian American communities as well as members of different Native American nations, especially the Cheyenne and the Crow. Rachel Schaffer has argued that Johnson "presents characters that form their communities in fully inclusive fashion but more as a mosaic than a melting pot, where individual differences add to the beauty and vibrancy of the whole rather than losing their distinctiveness through assimilation."<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, his books confront, often in non-simplifying ways, various issues in connection to these characters. While Schaffer is right in pointing out that Johnson offers some of the most complex representations of non-white characters and storylines in American crime fiction, Johnson's work retains the settler-colonial practice of exploiting racialized characters for the profit of white ones. Consequently, this diversity does not dissolve Reddy's "hegemony of whiteness," perpetuated by the exploitation of such stereotypes as the Magical Indian.<sup>20</sup>

The problematic power relations do not so much emerge from the direct ways Johnson treats others as from the ways Walt's white, hetero-masculinist heroism is constructed at the cost of, predominantly, his best friend, Henry. This is most plainly illustrated in the

mountain scene of *The Cold Dish*: after the body of a teenager called Jacob Esper is found in the Bighorn Mountains, Walt, Henry, and Omar (a friend and helicopter owner) have to search for and save Jacob's brother, George, despite a snowstorm. After finding George and fighting with him, which leaves both George and Henry injured, Walt finds himself forced to hike the considerable distance from the mountains to the nearest parking lot twice while the snowstorm is raging in order to save George and Henry. As Walt starts walking he receives help from the Old Cheyenne who are voiced through Henry's unconscious singing. The heroism of Walt is therefore constructed by deploying Henry's character as a "Magical Indian" and Walt as the "White Savior" while playing Indian.<sup>21</sup> Deloria describes the concept of "playing Indian" as white men who appropriate Indianness in order to construct their national identity. The mixture of being a White Savior and playing Indian in the character of Walt Longmire does nothing to dismantle the unconscious workings of white supremacy. As George Lipsitz states in his book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, "Our history and our fiction contain all too many accounts of whites acting with unctuous paternalism to protect 'helpless' people of color, but very few stories about white people opposing white supremacy on their own."<sup>22</sup> Johnson's use of Native American characters, while more complex than in most works by white authors of crime fiction, remains an exploitative use of race, which serves to construct the white protagonist's heroism.

The textual settler-colonial power relations at work become especially problematic with the treatment of violence against Native American women in Johnson's *The Cold Dish*. In this novel, the murder of Cody Pritchard reminds Absaroka County Sheriff Walt Longmire of a sexual assault case, where Cheyenne teenager Melissa Little Bird was brutally gang raped by four white teenagers (Cody Pritchard, Jacob and George Esper, and Bryan Keller). This case is haunting because of its brutality and because the white boys have received little to no sentences, which gave Melissa and her family neither justice nor closure. However, Walt's murder investigation reveals that the murder is only indirectly connected to Melissa Little Bird's case. We learn that it is Vonnie Hayes, a wealthy, white woman who shot these boys. Her motive is to restore a sense of justice for Melissa, Vonnie claims, as well as for herself since, during her childhood, Vonnie had been sexually abused by her father while her mother helped to keep these repeated abuses secret. By drawing a direct comparison between the two cases, the violence Vonnie experienced and committed stand in for and replace the violence Melissa and her family experienced. Consequently, the novel discusses violence against women in a way that ignores past and on-going settler colonialism, race, and socioeconomic power relations.

Despite its constructions of diversity and respect toward Native American communities, particularly the Cheyenne, the novel's inherent settler-colonial power relations and white privilege lingers especially in the direct comparison between violence against Indigenous women and violence against white women. To directly compare violence against Native American and white women effaces the systemic, racist, and settler-colonial nature of the violence faced by Native American women, including the way that white women and white womanhood has contributed to gendered violence against Native Americans. Crucially, the point here is not to argue that violence against Native American women is more condemnable than violence against white women. Instead, it is critical to point out that to reduce violence against Native American women and against white women to a common

denominator reveals the lingering settler-colonial character of Johnson's work because it obscures the settler-colonial nature of violence against Native American women and because it commodifies the tragic potential ascribed to this violence.

Despite *The Cold Dish's* simplification of all sexual violence to the same, the violence Native American women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people face is uniquely shaped and nourished by the on-going imperialist power struggle of the United States against Native American nations, especially the systematic impunity experienced by perpetrators.<sup>23</sup> Native American women suffer violence at disproportionate rates. The 2007 Amnesty International report, *Maze of Injustice*, states that "Native American and Alaska Native women are more than 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than women in the USA in general."<sup>24</sup> In addition, a 2000 study from the US Department of Justice reveals that 34.1 percent of Native American women will be raped during their lifetime, which is by far the highest rate in the nation.<sup>25</sup> However, because an unknown number of rape cases are never reported and because homeless people are generally not included in these statistics, this figure is suspected to be even higher still. More recently, André B. Rosay's 2016 Research Report of the National Institute of Justice states that an astonishing 84.3 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence, 56.1 percent of whom have experienced sexual violence.<sup>26</sup> Rape and sexual violence are therefore not a rare occurrence for Native American women, but a concrete and recurrent reality which is an assault not only against Native American women but also against their communities.

Not only is violence against Native American women disproportionately frequent, but its settler-colonial character renders it systemic. In her book, *The Beginning and the End of Rape*, Sarah Deer (Muscogee Cree) expands on the above-mentioned statistics by adding that "there appears to be a particularly brutal physicality in assaults on Native women."<sup>27</sup> She continues by pointing out that while the vast majority of rape cases in the United States are intraracial (meaning that the perpetrator and victim are of the same race), Native American women report that "the majority of assailants are non-Native . . . This is an anomaly in American criminology; violent crime in America is almost always intraracial."<sup>28</sup> As alarming a picture as these statistics already paint, it is rendered worse by the lack of support from authorities for victims of violence. Scholars, NGOs, and grassroots organizations working to prevent violence against Native American women agree the settler-colonial state enables increased vulnerability and precarity for Native American women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people through competing jurisdictions that create impunity, disempowering tribal authorities, and/or inappropriate or negligent responses. As Mishuana Goeman crisply states, "For Indigenous women, the heteropatriarchal state *is* the violent actor, not the protector of rights."<sup>29</sup> In sum, Native American women face a settler-colonial assault on Indigenous sovereignty that enables mostly white men to abuse Indigenous women with a frequency and violence on a genocidal scale. These crimes serve not only to confirm the control of one gender over the other, but also to perpetually reaffirm the white-American dominance over Indigenous lands and communities that is necessary to the national narrative of white American land ownership and identity.

The settler-colonial roots of violence against Native American women and the disproportionate levels of occurrence and brutality of violence against Native American women are what is masked when Johnson equates violence against Native American women with violence against white women. More problematically still, Johnson commodifies its tragic potential by extracting it from Melissa's narrative in order to reinvest it in the construction of the tragic white victim. This is why Johnson's treatment of violence against Native American women in *The Cold Dish* is harmful and imbued with white privilege. Consider the following passage in which Walt is trying to process the case and ponders the ways in which Melissa's and Vonnie's families reacted to the trauma of sexual assault:

I thought about how the two women's situations were alike, and how different the two cultures' reactions were. When Melissa had met this crisis in her life, her family and friends had restored her, but when Vonnie had faced abuse, she had met silence and recrimination, and the violation done to her child's soul had been swept under the Turkish rugs. Granted, it could be said that it was the times and not the culture that had dictated these reactions, and I hoped that was true. I really did.<sup>30</sup>

While this passage might be read as a compliment to Native American strength, sense of community, and resilience, the moral emerging from this statement is troubling. According to this quote, Walt implies that Melissa has fared better than Vonnie in their respective story of sexual abuse because Vonnie's suffering is exacerbated by the lack of support and cumulative trauma she experienced in the aftermath of the abuse. However, while Walt rightly states that white, bourgeois patriarchy bears the main responsibility for Vonnie's actions, to conclude that Melissa has been "restored" bears the risk of negating her suffering and obscuring the enormous amount of violence Native American women are exposed to because of the imposition of Christian, capitalist, white patriarchy. The tragic and emotional potential ascribed to Melissa's case is taken from her and her community to be transferred to Vonnie, who, as Walt's love interest and an eventual suicide victim unable to overcome her trauma, is presented as the more tragic victim in the story. The cultural practice of extracting the tragic potential ascribed to other, mostly racialized, characters for the construction of the tragic or heroic attribute of the white protagonist is, similarly to the Magical Indian, a discursive strategy that is employed in order to justify the white characters' actions and increase their tragic heroism. Since Johnson barely denounces and fails to further discuss the ramifications of violence against Native American women, the evocation of this issue conforms to its neoliberal multicultural era in its superficiality and eventual profit to the white characters and author by enhancing the tragedy of Native American characters to commodify it for white profit.

The concealment of Native American suffering for the profit of white characters is worsened by the racist representative strategy of pathologizing Melissa and her father, whereas Vonnie is framed as a rational, beautiful, and desirable businesswoman. The various ways in which dysfunctionalities of Cheyenne characters are highlighted reinforce the suspicion that the earlier argument of community support and cultural difference is a backhanded compliment, which insidiously serves to paint the Cheyenne community with a broad brush. The pathologization of Native Americans is particularly strong in *The Cold Dish*: while Melissa suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome, her father has lost both legs to

diabetes and lives in poverty. To portray the Native American sexual assault survivor and her family as pathological is damaging for three reasons. Firstly, it increases Melissa's victimization and, therefore, tragic potential; secondly, it deprives her and her father of agency; and, thirdly, it augments the white hero in his legitimacy as white savior. Moreover, in her article "Imagining the Good Indigenous Citizen," Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains the logic of pathologizing Indigenous peoples:

The individualism of neoliberalism informs the discourse of pathology within the race war, enabling the impoverished conditions under which Indigenous people live to be rationalised as a product of dysfunctional cultural traditions and individual bad behavior. In this context Indigenous pathology, not the strategies and tactics of patriarchal white sovereignty, is presented as inhibiting the realization of the state's earlier policy of self-determination.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, Moreton-Robinson underlines that the main problem with pathologizing Indigenous peoples is that instead of dismantling the real origins of this state in settler colonialism, this discursive and representational strategy presents pathology as inherent to Indigenous individuals in order to remove agency and sovereignty from them and legitimize putting it in the hands of white people. In short, to pathologize Indigenous communities is nothing but a rhetorical strategy to legitimize the settler-colonial rule over them. Precisely this strategy is also applied in *The Cold Dish*: Melissa and her family are relegated to the position of pathologized, passive, and emotionally exploitable background figures while Walt and Vonnie possess all the agency. Giving more visibility to the important sociopolitical issue of violence against Native American women in this novel only serves to enhance the glory of white salvation through the pathologization of the Cheyenne community in order to legitimate the existing settler-colonial status quo. The inherent reinforcement of white privilege and superiority in these representational strategies echo Indigenous feminists' critique of whitemainstream feminism which Moreton-Robinson summarizes as the following: "Colonial processes have shaped white feminists' oblivion to their race privilege and their indifference to the history of their relations with Indigenous women. The exercising of white race privilege therefore remains uninterrogated."<sup>32</sup> In other words, the concealment of the settler-colonial origins of contemporary violence against Indigenous women and the obscuring of race as a sociopolitical category of oppression only serves to reinforce white supremacy as inherent element of contemporary US society.

## Assuaging White Guilt in *Longmire*

While the television show develops Native personas and their storylines into complex characters and addresses important settler-colonial issues on Native American land, there remains a pronounced undercurrent of white privilege and settler colonialism throughout the show. The show *Longmire* was launched in 2012. It was produced by A&E for the first three seasons and by Netflix for the last three seasons. This show is noteworthy in terms of the attention it gives to Native American issues and in terms of its vast popularity. It received good reviews, especially for its narrative strands, the cast's acting, and, most of



all, for the attention it pays to Native American issues, as comments from the Native American cast illustrate. Navajo actor Jay Tavaré, who appeared in the episode “Dogs, Horses, Indians,” writes in his review published in *Huffpost* that “[b]esides giving us great drama, the show dares to address some very sensitive and current issues that face Indian country today.”<sup>33</sup> Oneida actor Graham Greene, who plays Malachi Strand, formulates it more succinctly when he tweeted, “Longmire is the best show I ever had the opportunity to work on.”<sup>34</sup> In the show, Walt Longmire is played by Robert Taylor, Victoria Moretti by Katee Sackhoff, and Henry Standing Bear by Lou Diamond Phillips. While the individual episodes are mostly based on Johnson’s short stories or parts of novels, there are also more continuous narrative strands or characters not present in the mystery series. For example, the first three seasons’ continuous narrative strand is the resolution of the murder of Martha, Walt’s wife. From the third season onward until the end, the continuous and increasingly important strand is the narrative of Hector, a Cheyenne providing justice for his community where the federal and tribal authorities fail. In the last few seasons, Henry takes up this role. The narrative of Hector is especially interesting when it mixes with Gaby’s narrative in the fourth season. Gaby is a young Cheyenne woman who is sexually assaulted by two white oil rig workers from a nearby man-camp. As she has been raped by two white men, her case illustrates the difficulty of investigating and convicting (especially white) perpetrators of crimes taking place on the reservation and how their impunity creates the need for alternative forms of justice for Indigenous people.

In many instances, the television show does not simply acknowledge issues that Native Americans face on a regular basis, but actually takes them as the central concern and drive of the intrigue. The impact of casinos on the Cheyenne and white communities is associated with the character of Jacob Nighthorse, who is a successful Cheyenne businessman, whereas the complexity and frequent corruption of the judicial system and law enforcement units is particularly well depicted in the interactions among Malachi Strand (the former Cheyenne tribal police chief played by Graham Greene), Mathias (the current Cheyenne tribal police chief played by Zahn McClarnon [Lakota]), and Walt. Individual episodes center on specific topics. For example, the episode “Dog Soldier” (Season 1, episode 5) depicts the complexity of Native families’ frequent use of social services based on the real-world Native American overrepresentation in the US child welfare system.<sup>35</sup> “Tuscan Red” (Season 2, episode 9) examines the question of the pollution of tap water on the Cheyenne reservation by a fracking company just outside the reservation, which was of particular relevance considering the North Dakota Access Pipeline resistance.<sup>36</sup> Finally, “Miss Cheyenne” (season 3, episode 3) centers on the history and consequences of forced sterilization of Native women by white doctors.<sup>37</sup> Adolfo Larrue Martínez, who plays Jacob Nighthorse, applauds this attention to Native issues in an interview with Vincent Schilling for *Indian Country Today*:

During the “Dog Soldier” episode in the first season, they actually examined the concept of Native children being extracted from their homes and going into a foster care system and the bounties that went into play. We consulted with Native people from four different states who had direct experience with this issue. This is an issue that is generally ignored yet this show brought it to the public. The value of this is so rare. Other issues such as Methane in the water and Idle No More are generally off the radar. But the writers and producers see the value and they get the need to tell the stories. It is awesome that they embrace the stories of native people.<sup>38</sup>

This show is therefore an impressive and economically successful first step in the inclusion and representation of Native American cast, characters, and stories.

However, despite the considerable improvements in Native American representation this show presents, important problems still remain especially in its representation of violence against Native American women. The show exhibits dynamics of white privilege and settler colonialism, as is illustrated in the episode “Unfinished Business” (Season 1, Episode 10), derived from Johnson’s first novel.<sup>39</sup> Whereas *The Cold Dish* uses Melissa’s tragic potential to enhance Vonnie’s story, the TV show pushes this strategy one step further into white fragility and delusional, settler martyrdom by transferring the tragic potential to one of the white perpetrators. In this episode of *Longmire*, the character who represents the novel’s Melissa Little Bird is called Yasha Roundstone. She lives with her grandmother, Elsie, and her brother Veeho. The four rapists also have different names: Cody Pritchard from the novel is Greg Morris, the second perpetrator is Paul Carter, while the two others are Jake Lennox, who is the designated leader of the group, and Richard Stark. The murder intrigue remains directly connected to Yasha’s rape case since, after Greg and Paul are murdered, Jake disappears. Eventually, we discover that Rich has killed his two friends and kidnapped Jake in order to punish them and himself for the rape of Yasha. In the penultimate scene when we see Walt trying to convince Rich not to kill Jake, Rich exclaims, “We raped Yasha and we never got punished” before apologizing profusely and claiming that Jake forced him to rape Yasha, which is also when we see two flashbacks of the rape from Rich’s perspective.<sup>40</sup> While Walt demonstrates a clear sympathy for the Roundstone family and the Cheyenne community, this narrative deflects the traumatic experience and main emotional experience onto Richard. Not only do the flashbacks from Rich’s perspective perpetuate the violent objectification of Yasha, but the violence she experiences is also used as a pretext for the white teenage boy’s trauma and white guilt, since these flashbacks express *his* traumatic memory rather than hers. “Unfinished Business” takes up the same discursive strategy as the novel where it extracts the tragic and emotional potential ascribed to the Native American survivor in order to reinvest it in one of her white perpetrators to increase his anti-heroism. Yet this instance of extracting the tragic potential ascribed to the Native American character is even more perverse than in the novel—and, therefore, more faithful to settler colonialism and white supremacy—because the Cheyenne survivor is discursively abused and exploited for the profit of one of her abusers.

*Longmire* returns to the topic of sexual assault in more depth and nuance in its fourth season, where, compared to the novels, the theme of violence against Native American women becomes central to the show’s storyline for half a season. Gabriella (called “Gab”)

Langton's narrative starts in "The Calling Back," the sixth episode of the fourth season. The gist of Gab's narrative is that she is raped by two oil-rig workers, Will and Taylor. While Walt, Vic, and Cady (Walt's daughter) try to help Gab, she is paralyzed by her traumatic experience, and her mother, Linda, has accepted a financial compensation from the oil company in order not to press charges. Later, Will is found dead and Taylor, while attempting to rape another young Cheyenne woman, is attacked by Henry and fatally shot by Gab, who was seeking revenge. Gab and Henry, who is wounded, escape. Later, Gab is chased by Walker Browning's (the oil-rig company owner) men. It comes to a stand-off between oil-rig workers and Walt, Henry, and Gab, who are helped by a Crow Medicine Woman. During the final confrontation, Gab mysteriously escapes in the form of a Red Tail Hawk, according to the Medicine Woman. The oil men who have not been shot are arrested. This narrative enables an exploration of the complexities of the topic of violence against Native American women, materialized, for instance, in the criminal justice system for on-reservation rape cases by white men and the criminal potential of so-called man-camps. Yet the discussion of each of these points is tainted by a lingering white supremacist ideology since the failure of the legal proceedings of Gab's case is eventually attributed to Linda's (Gab's mother) greed and addiction problems, and the problem of the sexually predatory behavior of the men from the oil-rig camp is solved by the vanishing of the Cheyenne woman.

In this manner, when the complexities of the criminal justice system are depicted, the blame for their failure falls onto Gab's mother. The show emphasizes especially one main issue which prevents Native American women from receiving justice in the existing criminal justice system: the problem of jurisdiction. When Walt and Mathias (the Cheyenne tribal police chief) are searching the crime scene together, Mathias states: "It happened on the rez, so you can't do anything. It was a white man, so I can't do anything. Neither of us can officially investigate this case."<sup>41</sup> Mathias's blunt statement articulates the frustration of this jurisdictional no man's land. This only serves to strengthen the exploitation of young Cheyenne women because the white workers know that it is unlikely that they will be prosecuted. The federal authorities, who would be responsible for this case, rarely find or take the time to fulfill their responsibilities toward Indigenous nations, as is illustrated in Cady's efforts to find a federal prosecutor who will accept Gab's case. Yet, while the white heroes successfully manage to overcome all these obstacles, the blame for the failure of the legal procedures falls on Linda. While she is at first presented as a tough and hard-working woman, she quickly turns into a selfish, overly materialistic addict. In fact, when Walt interviews Gab for the second time and asks her what the workers, Gab and her friends did at the casino, Linda starts yelling at Gab, demanding to know where Gab was able to get the money to go to the casino. In the meantime, it becomes clear that Linda has received money from the oil company and refuses to press charges against the rapists, as becomes clear when she yells at Vic, Cady and Walt that "I don't need justice, I need to pay the rent. . . . A lot of bad things happen to a lot of women here. At least my daughter had the good luck to be raped by a white guy."<sup>42</sup> The cruelty of her words serves to reinforce her pathologizing portrayal as a monstrous, greedy addict, which, in turn, divests the guilt and failure of the criminal justice system in order to reinvest it in Linda. As a result, not only is the systemic violence hardly criticized, but the stereotype that Native American communities are "the real problem" is reinforced.

Similarly, while the violent consequences of man camps near Native American reservations are shown, the conflict is resolved by reiterating the Vanishing American narrative.<sup>43</sup> During the final shootout in the last episode of the fourth season, Browning is hurt and, when Walt tries to find Gab again, the Crow Medicine Woman tells him that Gab has been transformed into a Red Tail Hawk, her spirit animal, and is now safe with her ancestors. While the actual origin of the violence, namely the presence of a large number of white oil-rig workers close to a reservation, stays in place, it is the Cheyenne survivor who literally and inexplicably vanishes from the show. This reiterates the many Vanishing American narratives which accompanied genocidal policies by discursively emptying the North American continent of its Indigenous populations and romanticizing the disappearance of Indigenous peoples in order to attenuate white guilt. Ultimately, while the show is progressive in the ways in which it depicts and develops Native American characters and storylines, it nonetheless still fails to develop them in a non-exploitative way.

## Conclusion


Although *Longmire* was one of the most progressive shows of its time concerning its development of Native American characters and storylines, and Johnson's novel figures complex Native American characters, settler-colonialism is sustained through these works in three main ways. Not only do the novel and TV show redeploy the racist stock characters of the Magical Indian and the White Savior, but especially the TV show also reiterates a version of the stereotypical Vanishing American narrative inherited from the Western genre. Furthermore, both cultural productions heavily pathologize the Cheyenne community, which deprives them of agency. Finally, the novel and show both transform pain, suffering, and grief into transferable commodities. This allows them to disinvest the pain and tragedy suffered by the Native American characters in order to reinvest this tragic potential in white characters, which serves to reinforce their tragic heroism. This commodification of tragic potential and emphasis on its sentimentalization help obscure the settler-colonial origins and systemic perpetuation of violence against Native American women.

While Johnson's work and the television show are progressive in their treatment of Native American characters and storylines, at least in terms of the standard set by white authorship, the very fact that they are celebrated as progressive despite their many damaging flaws and misrepresentations points to how unprepared white authors and producers still are to dismantle white privilege and settler colonialism. Considering the systemic and extremely brutal character of violence against Native American women, it is not enough to simply give this violence visibility by marginally including it in a crime narrative. Instead, representations of violence against women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people must go further to overturn the violences of settler-colonial dynamics. This is underlined by Allison Hargreaves when she writes that the critical analysis of representation of violence against Indigenous women "is urgently required in our present moment, in which violence is not so much invisible to the public (as some critics have argued), but is actually misrepresented in ways that pathologize Indigenous women while

normalizing systemic colonial violence in their lives."<sup>44</sup> It is exactly this kind of misrepresentation that we face in *The Cold Dish* as well as in *Longmire*.

The failure to recognize settler-colonial ideology in representational devices such as the stock character of the white savior, the genres of crime and Western fiction, or the color-blind conflation of violence against women not only limit the critical affordance of this representation, but also inherently reinforces white supremacy and settler colonialism. If white authors insist on continuing to use Native American cultural heritage, experiences, and characters, it is crucial for those authors to become aware of and resist settler-colonial representational strategies and continue close cooperation with Native American nations and authors, a lot of whom already offer decolonial representations of Indigenous peoples and futurities, in order to develop a fair and complex representation. The larger issue at stake in representations of Indigenous people is not so much questions of authenticity but the disruption of a symbolic order that enables settler colonialism and the acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty.

## Notes

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5. Craig Johnson, *The Cold Dish* (London and New York: Penguin, 2005). 

6. Taylor Sheridan, dir., *Wind River* (Park City, UT: Park City Studios & Lionsgate, 2017), DVD. [↗](#)
7. Maureen Reddy, "Race and American Crime Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, edited by Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135–147. [↗](#)
8. Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald, *Shaman or Sherlock: The Native American Detective* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 2. [↗](#)
9. Ray B. Browne, *Murder on the Reservation: American Indian Crime Fiction: Aims and Achievements* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). [↗](#)
10. A note on terminology: in this article, the term "Indian" is only used to denote the legal status of members of Native American nations or the constructed, stereotypical version of Native Americans invented and perpetuated by white culture. Otherwise, tribal names will be used where possible and "Native Americans" if speaking of Indigenous peoples in the United States in general. [↗](#)
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## Coronavirus Pedagogy in the Zoomscape: Pinhole Intimacy Culture Meets Conscientization

by Marcus Breen | Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** The COVID-19 pandemic emptied universities, colleges, and schools across the United States in March 2020, forcing instructors into an unavoidable culture in which a networked commercial technology mediated teaching and learning. In the tradition of critical pedagogy, this article argues that students and instructors alike engaged through the artificial lenses and screens of Zoom. The “pinhole intimacy” of the Zoomscape is assessed using conscientization, the concept offered by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, to describe most pedagogy as an oppressive apparatus that can be overcome with direct engagement between students and instructors. In such an opticentric context, the Zoomosphere’s intimacy is used to explore how the emancipation proposed by conscientization might be applied to the culture of pedagogy in a college with a diverse student population, including pedagogical interventions to address the challenges associated with teaching Division I athletes. The context of a large communication department at Boston College provides the empirical foundation for the exploration of coronavirus pedagogy.

**KEYWORDS** pedagogy, COVID-19, Zoom, US college athletics, Paulo Freire, conscientization, intimacy, opticentric

## Pinhole Intimacy through Opticentricity

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shut-down of schools, colleges, and universities across the United States, forcing the emergence of coronavirus pedagogy on the teaching community. As well as enforcing a style of online teaching for which nobody—instructors and students—was prepared, coronavirus pedagogy became the cultural condition with which millions of people engaged in education had to live. As a new type of pedagogy it combined the experience of classroom teaching and learning, two categories that generalize the uncertain environment that is a commonplace site for discourse and debate about education. The onset of the pandemic meant that teaching engaged undergraduate students, described demographically as “Generation Z” or GenZs, that is young people born after 1996, and the first generation “growing up in an ‘always on’ technological environment.”<sup>1</sup> These undergraduates learned in a context defined by mediation, where Zoom, a corporate video conferencing tool, technologically overdetermined the pandemic’s unprecedented educational relations. As such, this mediated teaching and learning context was more novel for teachers than the GenZs,

forcing educators to reckon with questions about the characteristics of this unprecedented phenomenon, p, in the context of the pandemic, prompting questions about how to teach this thing called coronavirus pedagogy. Not only did COVID-19 provoke in the self-conscious cultural worker—in this case the teacher—questions about how we taught, inevitably, the question was and will continue to be one about context: what now is the culture of teaching?

This question emerged given the decentering impact of the pandemic's conditions. Constitutive of such decentering was the emergence of the conceits about the teaching and learning environment for US undergraduate education before the pandemic. Described in pessimistic, even apocalyptic terms by Henry Giroux as a "formative culture" in which the public sphere has been transformed by the economic and financialization imperatives of the market with such intensity that, "The process of depoliticization is amplified through the ongoing privatization and commercialization of formerly public spaces, which then provide no support for citizen-based struggles and the expressive capacities required for public exchange"<sup>2</sup> Such a critique of teaching *before* the pandemic can be applied to the educational relations that described teaching and learning during the event, as coronavirus pedagogy forced a style of online teaching that generated a novel critical cultural sensibility. It upended established classroom interactions with networked technology in the institutions that hosted it—public and private alike—generating contradictions that provoked new questions. It provided something of a response to Giroux's pre-pandemic question about the impact of new media on education:

The central question should be how do we imagine the new media and its underlying communication systems as contributing to a distinctly different public sphere that offers the promise of recasting modes of agency and politics outside of the neoliberal ideology and disciplinary apparatus that now dominate contemporary culture?<sup>3</sup>

In answering his own question Giroux suggested that social media and related interactive platforms must reconfigure "the narrow framing mechanisms of casino capitalism, militarism, and religious fundamentalism," to generate a new culture of civic engagement.<sup>4</sup> Pandemics like COVID-19 took this kind of criticism, grounded on a shakily conceived notion of civic engagement through new media (worthy and necessary as it was), and wrestled it into a different formative culture. In fact, Giroux's important yet foreboding analysis, highlighted a contradictory pandemic context in which hopefulness for survival from disease took place within the intensified corporate structures of networked technology.

In this context, as if by technological magic, the routines of the classroom were transformed, becoming spaces where "pinhole intimacy" replaced the constrained yet open classroom spaces of pedagogical tradition.<sup>5</sup> Changing how students and instructors saw each other through Zoom's pinhole amplification was (and often remains) inescapable. Suddenly, without the theoretical preparation that embodies the critical orientation of cultural studies and academic life, digital technology released everyone into the opticentric firmament of teaching and learning. Peering through the pinhole at each other, opticentricity first decentered previous systems, methods, and theories of education, then

it amplified the central image in the video screen frame, while around the penumbra a dull cloud of uncertainty hid the broader landscape. In this refined yet ambiguous online environment, classes and courses were subjected to the opticentric culture of teaching and learning that is coronavirus pedagogy. And as a result of looking through the contextual pinhole of Zoom, questions were prompted about who exactly were the individual students looking at me from their screens. Furthermore, what did I know about the institution of higher learning in which I worked that made such opticentricity possible?

In the first instance, opticentricity amplified the fact that like most university-level workers, I am a professor without professional teacher training who engages in pedagogical mimicry. That is to say, in keeping with most of my colleagues everywhere, I follow examples set by those whose style I have observed and reproduced, first from my childhood in a Baptist family where rhetorical style was learned from Billy Graham, Martin Luther King Junior, and much less Malcolm X (all Baptists), my undergraduate days, and more recently from colleagues. Matching this professorial unpreparedness to the condition of the coronavirus pedagogy prompted this inquiry but took me further given my appreciation for Giroux's regular critiques of US higher education, along with my long-standing research interest in the relationship between digital technology, culture, political economy, and left praxis. My response was informed by what Derek Ford called a pedagogy that "bridges the gap between what is and what can be" (and an extension of the public policy mantra "what ought to be?").<sup>6</sup> This gap was informed by a passing familiarity with concepts drawn from Paulo Freire's 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and his 1970 article "Cultural Action and Conscientization," reproduced in the book with the telling title *The Politics of Education*. By 2021, the centenary of Freire's birth, coronavirus pedagogy's enforced style of online teaching had transformed academic labor, leaving little space beyond the pinhole, suggesting that this was a new type of oppression for everyone using Zoom.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it was, to reference Giles Deleuze, an "enclosure," in which "a generalized crisis" amplified the impact of technology, where "molds, distinct castings," generated a reaction, that is documented in what follows: an insistence on knowing more about what was revealed by the culture of Zoom, closing the gap between the insistent, imperfect digital present and its utopian potential.<sup>8</sup>

## From Oppression to Conscientization to Coronavirus Pedagogy

Thanks to Zoom, coronavirus pedagogy provoked a refreshed version of Paulo Freire's conscientization, one grounded in a recognition that

Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves. Their reflectiveness results not just in a vague and uncommitted awareness, but in the exercise of a profoundly transforming action upon the determining reality. Consciousness of and action upon reality are, therefore, inseparable constituents of the transforming act by which men become beings of relation.<sup>9</sup>

The conscientization theory applies to the oppressed, in that their quest for freedom is expressed in education through the process of reflexivity, one that brings consciousness and action together. No longer is it possible to participate in pedagogy as if one is outside the mold, the dominating structure of capitalism. Technology oppresses everyone. For Deleuze, this is the "society of control," in which nothing is ever finished.<sup>10</sup> Through critical engagement, writes Freire, more optimistically than Deleuze, reflexivity about oneself and the world emerges, making it possible to recognize the way one's humanity has been captured, to acknowledge that culture is the result of "structural relations between the dominated and the dominators" and respond by seeking to be free through praxis, which is a commitment to humanize the world through the transformation that results from praxis.<sup>11</sup> Freire makes this analysis against "the culture of silence," which he describes as the conditions of living in the Third World, where the metropolis, insisting on dependency, makes it impossible to be heard. "The dependent society is by definition a silent society," he wrote.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, unless there is reflection that emerges from critical consciousness, there is no historical shift to understanding the conditions under which one lives, rendering the continuation of silence as inaction.<sup>13</sup>

Within this aspiration for praxis, Freire's model of conscientization has contemporary relevance to coronavirus pedagogy because the pandemic demanded a response. "Critical consciousness is brought about not through an intellectual effort alone, but through praxis—through the authentic union of action and reflection."<sup>14</sup> Under these conditions the oppressed and the oppressor are joined around the poles of contradiction "in their struggle for liberation."<sup>15</sup> Using technology, they move beyond technology's "mythical deviations"—"a species of new divinity . . . a cult of worship"—recognizing that, "Critically viewed, technology is nothing more nor less than a natural phase of the creative process which engaged man from the moment he forged his first tool and began to transform the world for its humanization."<sup>16</sup> As conscientization manifests itself as "reflective action," technology, in the form of Zoom in coronavirus pedagogy, pushed the oppressor and the oppressed together into the contradictory space of the opticentric pinhole.

The unity of the oppressor with the oppressed is reinforced by the assertion Freire makes about the dialogue between them. Freire's demand, in keeping with the Marxist desire to overthrow the forces of oppression, is for leaders to engage in structural transformation through reflection and action, where to be "truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others."<sup>17</sup> Experiencing coronavirus pedagogy for many teachers and students involved the determining force of Zoom's universal oppression through the negative force of digital technologies. Headlines in April 2020, like "Why Zoom is Terrible," to more recent negative readings about "Zoom fatigue," albeit with options for moving into fresh social relations due to what has been learned, were typical of the belief that Zoom denigrated dialogue and the opportunity for shared reflection for which Freire argued.<sup>18</sup> Freire's approach avoids this pessimistic reading by "leaders" or Professors, by bringing the oppressor together with the oppressed within a multidimensionality that avoids internalizing the oppression of students as individuals, by seeking a collective praxis of "equality of treatment access, justice."<sup>19</sup> The culture of coronavirus pedagogy brought together novel intersecting disciplinary concerns, opening up critical new knowledge. It is within this field that conscientization is generative of questions about how teaching and learning was constituted in the new formative

culture. Inevitably, the anterior question was and continues to be: in what ways did the culture of teaching change as my own and every student's subjectivity came into relief through the opticentric pinhole of Zoom?

The question emerged from the application of conscientization to new fields of human experience due to the closure of educational institutions during the pandemic and the opening of the pinhole's opticentricity. The new terrain is one where critical evaluation of the oppressed describes both student and teacher within a capitalism that requires the Marxist edge Freire offered. Superficially, students and faculty were required to suddenly leave campus under emergency conditions, to be mediated not under conditions of their own choosing, some in self-serving self-interest "praising synchronous tools like Zoom as professional life saviors."<sup>20</sup> The pandemic closure mobilized uncompromising criticism of university education, in the style of Henry Giroux. For example,

One of the more insidious aspects of the university system (always linked to P-12 schools, banks, prisons, other corporations, etc.) is how it obscures its violent sorting of persons into radically uneven life chances while modulating effects of deservingness and safety. The affective politics of humanism means that no classroom discussion can ever be separated from larger historical-political forces of colonization, racialization, heteropatriarchy, and extractive capitalism. The university functions for many of us, individually and collectively, as a site of cruel optimism: if we could just get the jobs, the promotions, the postdocs, the degrees, the acceptance letters, the university might be livable.<sup>21</sup>

Critically, Zoom's pinhole intimacy reconstructed such critiques, accentuating human relations along the lines of critical digital pedagogy, setting conditions for a reclamation of "the critical aims of education, its questioning and reflection, its imperative towards justice and equity, and its persistent need to read the world within which it takes place, whether that's a classroom, a living room, a playground, or a digital device."<sup>22</sup> Viewing students and faculty as oppressed within this critical frame suggests that Freire's conscientization is a theory by which to evaluate the culture of who and what we were when we sat in front of our computers. Such reflection repositions subjects whose learning spaces were determined by the pandemic, actively creating a conjuncture where the prevailing conditions of capitalism merged with technology and the institutions in which Zoom was used.<sup>23</sup> At an empirical level, a description of what I saw and experienced was required drawing on the framework offered by Freire that in turn, provoked and nourished the tradition of critical pedagogy in its articulation with cultural studies. This radical position begins with a description that identifies this pandemic as a historical period in which technology mediated social relations as educational relations, even as "the aspirations of the oppressed are at once given some acknowledgment and at the same time limited and thwarted," as Raymond Williams noted.<sup>24</sup> Such are the contradictions of oppression within a persistently unfolding praxis.



# Technology and Oppression—Zoom “Happiness?”

As COVID-19 officially killed hundreds of thousands of Americans, it might have been wise to admit that this is no country for old theorists, and definitely not a country for old men, who, if they were 85 years or older in the US died at a higher rate than anyone else, except non-Hispanic Black or African American (Black) and non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) persons.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it was unwise to recall that James Carey noted in *Communication as Culture*, well before the internet was privatized in the mid-1990s, that communication advances were “rarely seen . . . as opportunities to expand people’s power to learn and to exchange ideas and experience.”<sup>26</sup> Thankfully, critical scholarship has shifted since Carey, offering optimistic interventions through technology. Nevertheless, everyone engaged in the pedagogical enterprise was thrown into the privately owned Zoom space, reconstructing users within the additional private spaces of their homes, dormitory rooms, and bedrooms, offering a philosophical mechanism for recognizing “the importance of dialogue as the basis for critical consciousness.”<sup>27</sup> In the new educational relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, Zoom foregrounded a formative culture for collective interactions, as the previous forms of classroom interaction were ruptured. Given conscientization, it was a formative cultural context that stressed new conditions and opportunities for “critical awareness, the understanding of self, reality, and its intersection with just action.”<sup>28</sup>

These opportunities further elaborated on the politics of educational work, as Freire suggested, removing teaching from some category of benign employment activity, into a place in which “love” was embodied in cooperative learning, becoming a site for the emergence of new ways of engaging with knowledge.<sup>29</sup> As such, it was political, that is “to build polis, to generate community, to exercise power in a solidary, egalitarian, friendly, cooperative, attentive, sensitive, democratic way.”<sup>30</sup> With mounting numbers of fatalities, was it possible to conceive of the pinhole as an access point for a coronavirus pedagogy that might meet such ambitions?

For critical humanities’ professors, coronavirus pedagogy was a new way of making sense of an opportunity to explore a fuller measure of education and in so doing recognize what John Dewey noted in *Democracy and Education*, that, “in certain fundamental respects the same predicaments of life recur from time to time with only such changes as are due to change of social context...”<sup>31</sup> For its part, coronavirus pedagogy offered more than a predicament, it was a rupture from the business as usual of the contemporary university, presenting new possibilities for working through and changing educational philosophy in its relationship with culture.<sup>32</sup> And yet, as thousands upon thousands of Americans died from COVID-19, Zoom offered its contradictory “other,” a context dominated by the reinforcement of a narrowing corporate model, concentrated through the lens of a commercial platform.

This contradictory context is summarized by Shaked Spier, who explained that

The platforms are designed only to promote neoliberal agendas of deregulation, antiunionism, and capital (that is, money and data) accumulation but also to deploy a rhetoric that aims directly at disguising these agendas behind concepts such as sharing, community, freedom and flexibility.<sup>33</sup>

Beginning with the mediated pedagogy of Zoom, the lens was commercially determinative, offering continuing educational engagement, even as campuses closed. As the Zoom corporation noted in its 2020 US Securities Exchange Commission filing, “We provide a video-first communications platform that delivers happiness and fundamentally changes how people interact”:

We have a unique model that combines viral enthusiasm for our platform with a multipronged go-to-market strategy for optimal efficiency. Viral enthusiasm begins with our users as they experience our platform—it just works. This enthusiasm continues as meeting participants become paid hosts and as businesses of all sizes become our customers. Our sales efforts funnel this viral demand into routes-to-market that are optimized for each customer opportunity, which can include our direct sales force, online channel, resellers, and strategic partners.<sup>34</sup>

Designed for “happiness” not education, Zoom became the mediating tool of choice for institutions. The changed circumstances of undergraduate teaching through pinhole intimacy, prompted questions that channeled a mongrel mixture of cultural studies with political economy that I had not previously asked:

- Who are the students I teach?
- What are the conditions in the institution in which they learn and I teach?
- How do these students approach learning?
- What does the formative culture of Coronavirus pedagogy mean?
- In the spirit of critical research, is there a way to focus on the changed context of this new environment, to establish more effective ways of positioning emancipatory pedagogy?
- Can I apply Freire’s concepts to this case study of the Coronavirus pedagogy?

Understanding the changing context of US higher education due to COVID-19 is a task that begins with describing the territory in which the culture of teaching is foundational, for myself, the students, and our institution. Seeing that changing context as one in which oppression finds new or reinforced forms was part of the task in what amounts to a case study in applied research about conscientization.

# The Zoomscape in a Division I University: Acknowledging Cultural Formations

In the Communication Department in which I teach, with up to 800 majors in a regular semester, the context was typically complicated before the emergency transformation wrought by the pandemic. Then, in the context of coronavirus pedagogy, the existing contexts were multiplied, then amplified, reinventing for the classroom the “scalar dynamic,” the contradictory connective conditions that Arun Appadurai identified at the start of the internet era in 1990, in “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” Appadurai finessed the emergence of ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, financescapescapes, technoscapescapes and ideoscapescapes with a nuanced dialectics, noting the variations in the emerging cultural commonality of the networked landscape. In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, Appadurai’s global imperatives embodied in ‘scapes coalesced through the Zoomscape’s pinhole opticentricity, with a flux of contradictory concerns. The cultural economy was generalized in Zoom, even though the specifics of each Zoom user was magnified in their relationship to their ethnicity, ideology, location, technology, and so on. Within the dialectic of the Zoomscape’s forces, an appreciation emerged for the diversity of students I teach, an appreciation that was given meaning by Freire’s concept of conscientization, constituted as expressions of solidarity in a survivalist mode.

The coronavirus shutdown reinforced education’s digital turn at the global scalar dynamic, even while being curiously intimate, magnifying the images of students and instructors on the screen. As each participant was identified through the pinhole of opticentricity, the surprising flawlessness of the representations, the imagery of me and my students, like millions around the world, offered a continuation of teaching obligations in a new milieu, one characterized by the mediated intersection of critical humanities, cultural studies, and diverse student needs and capabilities within the unwelcome health and safety pressures of the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, it was a universalized type of oppression, which is where Freire’s concepts are relevant, as the limitations of teaching were multiplied by Zoom, all of which required a response for which no one was prepared. Certainly it was “intimacy without proximity” as Fan Yang suggested, where such intimacy was mediated by the Zoom platform within the intensified urgency of the pandemic.<sup>35</sup> Generation Z students and their teachers were further apart while being drawn closer together in an environment more familiar to social media than the open spaces of classrooms.

My experiences were similar to thousands of other teachers, yet unique, due to the institutional determinants, constraints, and policies in place at Boston College (BC), the four-year Jesuit university where I teach. Through the pinhole, the amplification of each student provoked me to explore who they were, how they adapted to the classroom of the Zoomscape, what it means to be a Division I college athlete in the northeast United States, and the cultural shifts that accompanied being off campus yet in class. Such an inquiry is critical because with the pandemic campus shutdown, no detailed conversation, critique, or training was included for faculty to help close the gap between what is and what can be. The opticentric amplification of everyone in the Zoomscape made it evident that we were oppressed at all levels by the technology in the institutions that unquestioningly required

everyone to use it, adding a layer of new work obligations to pedagogy within the logistics of reorganizing classes. All of which heightened my critical awareness of my ignorance about the people on my screen and the institutional setting of the Zoomscape.

Inevitably, the context was messy. Or, as a student wrote in a reflection for the end of semester examination in the spring Communication Ethics course I taught, paraphrasing one of the class readings by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, “there is a need to mix the accustomed analytical purity of philosophy with the moral messiness of everyday situations.”<sup>36</sup> Freire’s concept of conscientization pushes critical philosophy beyond the culture of chaos into a dimension that is attuned to the need to take an ethical course of action in dialogue—to comprehend the knowledge on the screen as well as the conditions that produced it and the implications for the pursuit of justice resulting from those interactions.

For example, almost no one was prepared for having students seeing them at home. In my case, just as I could see them more fully as mediated and magnified individuals, so could they see me. When they spoke on Zoom they could be selected by me to fill the screen, in pixilated detail. As a counterpoint I wondered about what could be observed in my home office, the bookshelves with books, memorabilia like a trophy my wife earned as a child in a piano competition with a cricket ball resting in it, novels by Peter Carey and Andre Gide, the spine of the graphic novel *Red Rosa* by Kate Evans, or a poster of a Palestinian refugee I collected when I was a student at Australian National University in 1980, at about the time I saw Vanessa Redgrave speaking in support of Palestine.

Conversely, who was that walking across the room behind a student? After the first week almost all students in my class of forty turned off their cameras, leaving me alone to address my desk monitor filled with black boxes featuring student names. As students asserted their power, this Zoomscape of student empowerment was a new challenge, one of discomfort in the realization that my claims to engagement as an educator were spurious. My confidence sagged. I had to acknowledge that the culture of the Zoomscape incorporated new types of oppression, to which the students responded with the tools at hand, the agency offered to them by the “screen off” setting. Freire’s ideas gained traction in the willful and just refusal of students to be observed in their intimate spaces through the lens. Student agency is one thing, the mediated conditions enabling them to assert their power in the virtual classroom was an entirely new pedagogical experience.

## Student Athletes in the Mix

At the beginning of the spring 2020 semester, I taught thirty-five Division I Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) athletes about media and social media transitions, communication ethics, public policy, social and critical theory, and Artificial Intelligence. (To better get to conscientization for myself, the research about student athletes taught me that Women and Men’s ice hockey teams compete in the Hockey East competition, while sailing students compete in the Intercollegiate Sailing Association and ski in the Eastern

Intercollegiate Ski Association. It was disturbing to learn how little I knew about these structures of the student athlete experience).

Out of the ninety-two students in the three classes I taught, the student athletes deserve contextualizing because they exist as a near invisible, yet significant presence in the classroom. And in common with colleagues teaching undergraduates, I had no choice about their presence in my classes.

As the coronavirus hit and took hold in Massachusetts, everyone scattered homeward during the second week of March. For athletes, this shift translated into a life without teammates, practice, play, or partying, as new layers of activity were added to pandemic living. At a different register compared to regular students, student athletes experienced disruption beyond the everyday. Dramatic change came in the form of a negation of the regular context of the routines of practice-perform that define the lives of the ACC athlete. No longer absorbed in training for hours of every day, in a system in which courses have to be selected to fit in with training, athletes went home to participate in classes online without the interruptions of practice or travel to games. The dominant experience of practice-play for Division I student athletes gave way to the formal regularity of the curriculum-on-Zoom.

At the risk of stating the obvious, college athletics is highly regulated, which is to say, it is barely able to combine athletic excellence with academic outcomes for students. When training can officially begin and so on is determined by the ACC, the peak college sport regulator that sits above the colleges where the primary goal is education. Meanwhile, the public, university administrators, and non-academics see the end point of the practice hours in the performances on the field or the court. This contrasts with the classroom experience, where the daily athletic routines are like a game with an incomprehensible afterlife, a shadow play of moving texts. Who can say where the most valuable knowledge is acquired by student athletes? Certainly, recent research suggests that student-athletes identify with their athletic role far more than their academic role, causing a disruption to the dynamics of the classroom and resentment by student-athletes of their exploitation—an oppressive situation identified in recent court cases brought by college football players and their demand to be paid as players.<sup>37</sup> When BC's football team took to the field bearing the image of the American flag on their playing gear, the oppression of their utility as nationalistic symbols was obvious to anyone who was not blinded by the Stars and Stripes. For critics, teaching in a Division I college context is one of colliding cultures, where athletes are often ghosts in the classroom, their practices and travel absences orchestrated by their teams, with little control by faculty, their bodies regulated by the institution along with the national authorities that control athletics.

Meanwhile, classroom knowledge is structured in line with curricula expectations and its Jesuit, Catholic mission: "Boston College seeks to provide an education that will promote integration of the intellectual, social, religious, and affective dimensions. It urges students to reflect deeply on who they are and how they want to live their lives," notes the answer to "Why a Jesuit Education?"<sup>38</sup>

Continuing later in a section about the “Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” BC says: “The Catholic intellectual tradition is not static traditionalism, but is constantly evolving, drawing from the riches of the past to give life to the future and, in its search for truth, engaged with every discipline and with all forms of belief and nonbelief.”<sup>39</sup>

This context is clear, except for athletes, for whom formal academic knowledge collides with the informal knowledge they gain, especially the emotional intelligence learned playing games. Such informal human development is often relegated to the periphery in the era of science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) obsessions, even while the humanities and liberal arts are premised on the idea of the ineffable character of humanistic knowledge gained through dialogue. How should cultural studies and humanities academics entertain such conflicting ideologies of knowledge? One possibility is that contending knowledge contexts should be opened to debate and inclusion in education. This field is gradually entering pedagogical discourse through the discussion of computer games and “gamification” rather than sports, potentially upending oppressive systems of classroom environments, even while further extending new oppressions through the technological apparatus.<sup>40</sup>

That observation hardly resolves the challenges. For example, on a normal class day, before Coronavirus, rowers arrived for a 9:00 a.m. class, barely dry from showering after three to four hours of training on the Charles River along with ergonomic exercises at the Community Rowing “shed” on Nonantum Road, Newton. As the regular students stumble in, sometimes barely awake, they might carry a cup of coffee, a ham and cheese bagel or a muffin, noisily unwrapping then eating their breakfast at a desk a foot away from me while I lecture on the intricacies of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rule-making during the Network Neutrality controversy. Meanwhile the rowers, along with football and basketball players, fresh from lifting weights and other before-class morning routines, are ready for a nap, struggling to concentrate. The colliding student identities manifest in physical ways and are never far from the surface. Nevertheless, almost all students are preoccupied with social media conversations that pop up during all hours of the day and night, including during class times. The additional layer for athletes is social media accounts linked to their teams, coaches, travel and game plans. This means that everyone is not always working synchronously: awake, asleep, online, present, absent, multitasking, shifting in real time.

One needs to be respectful of this multicontextual culture. As I have noted elsewhere, social media is central to student life and a feature of activist culture and politics in the pursuit of social justice.<sup>41</sup> Making sense of it for students and young people is the right thing to do within a cultural studies worthy of its name. Managing it in the Zoomscape was another matter.

Indeed, when everyone left campus, the classroom context was deconstructed. No athletes trained with the team while everyone joined the universality of Zoom. For athletes, this move to isolation meant working with coaches through Zoom to keep fit, arranging skill activities while dreaming of what the future season might look like. Regular students continued their work.

Through Zoom conversations with student athletes I learned how Boston College baseball players experienced the sudden ending of classes on March 11, catching them unawares somewhere in the Carolinas. Busy with fifty-six scheduled games in the 2020 season, the baseball team and coaching staff packed up their equipment and headed back to Boston, where they immediately closed their dormitory rooms and bid farewell to the season and campus life, before traveling home to continue classes.

For seniors in all teams, this was the moment of deflation. "Regular" seniors were disappointed in the cancellation of commencement, graduation activities, and associated events marking the end of their college careers. Senior athletes experienced double the emotional distress as they readied for classes without training or games. Such generalized distress marked the abrupt end of college campus identity as it was replaced with admission to Zoomscape identity, leaving students and teachers alone to manage. Headlines from *Inside Higher Ed*, such as "Mental Health Needs Rise With Pandemic," identified anxiety disorders from numerous studies that could be read as symptoms of the oppression experienced using Zoom by Gen Z users.<sup>42</sup> Such conditions provoked a shift to conversations on campus about mental health, even as the pinhole intimacy offered a kind of engagement that unlocked more knowledge, even while prompting new psychic difficulties.

## Managing Diversity

In a Communication Department that includes courses like the ones I teach, Intercultural Communication, Social Media, Communication Ethics, New Media and Society, and Artificial Intelligence, student athletes can be referred to as athletes in class, and called on to engage in discussions about their teams, their experiences of success and failure on the fields, courts, and ice, and their observations about how new media, race, ethnicity, and unethical behavior inform their life experiences, teaching their classmates some of the lessons learned on and off the sports field. For example, after BC ice hockey players who were members of the US Women's Olympic and World Cup teams went on strike for pay, students from the team described their campaign in my classes. Their comments revealed what they had learned about women's rights, male athletic privilege, labor relations, and sport administrators. Added to a classroom discussion, their contributions as student-athletes were like diamonds in the rough soil of typical classroom pedagogy, opening vistas into other knowledge modalities.

Such learning opportunities are not inevitable. They have to be navigated, negotiated, and managed as a function of faculty-student interactions, against a tradition that insists that self-disclosure about individual experience (the "no politics or religion" mantra) is "off limits" in the exploration of culture. Taking advantage of the experiences of Division I student athletes in the classroom was welcomed by them, as they offered up their narratives without prompting. Before the pandemic, this alerted me to the way my own conscientization needed to mature in order to offer access to the uniqueness of student athlete knowledge, some of which was unique to my department with a relatively high number of student athletes. For example, a BC faculty colleague I met from a science



department had taught one athlete in fifteen years at BC. Across campus, it was impossible to generalize faculty's pedagogical experiences before the pandemic or in the Zoomscape.

As I noted above, Zoom deconstructed team identity and athletic codes of belonging. Sociologically, the team identity of athletes constitutes the pinnacle of their college experience. Online teaching allowed no such camaraderie, or the security of the team environment. For example, in normal circumstances on campus, football players move in groups of up to 10, enrolling in classes together, arriving in hustling bunches, as do groups of other team sport players.

This sketchy working ethnography of Gen Z athletes will have to suffice in the description of the changed classroom codes. It includes the way Black footballers behave, sitting along the back wall of classrooms, sometimes with their white teammates. Unfortunately, as recent research indicates, this positioning signifies a sense of student powerlessness.<sup>43</sup> With that knowledge, I used strategies such as asking questions of athletes as they tried to disappear into the back wall, where they hoped to be invisible, or was it to take refuge in an alien environment? Certainly, for the most part they expected to be identified as athletes, with little to contribute. In the coronavirus context I asked myself, what is the Zoomscape equivalent of hiding against the back wall for these athletes? While the answer is that not logging on or turning off the camera during a class session was one expression of power, a more positive prospect was that the pinhole intensity of the screen offered a kind of democratizing access to each individual, where they could be addressed personally. But Freire's conscientization prompts the question: is this mediated context merely a new and different form of oppression for the subset of student athletes, indeed for all students? And how does it oppress me, the instructor? The cultural formation of the Zoomscape had to be understood and critiqued in the search for conscientization and one way to comprehend the mediated formation was to look for empirical material about BC athletes. Once I had an improved understanding of the institution of BC and its athletes, perhaps it would be possible, I conjectured, to make an informed analysis of the ethnography I was attempting.

## Doing the Numbers—Athletes, Athletic Scholarships

Of the 682 student athletes at BC in 2020, 337 were men and 345 women.<sup>44</sup> Many female athletes reminded me with strident complaints in class discussions and essays that women rarely featured prominently in media coverage of the college's programs. That's despite the 1972 legislation of Title IX: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."<sup>45</sup> The Federal Government's Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) regulates the "equality," even while women's sports reinforce a sense of second-class status for female athletes.

The EADA's data site is an eye-opener worthy of more detailed analysis than this article can deliver. Suffice to say, it is instructive to learn that BC spent \$21,048,627 in student aid in 2018–2019, not only for athletes. This was about a quarter of the total revenue of \$82,680,712 generated by all athletic teams for the year, with the identical amount appearing as expenditure. That is what the finance folk call impeccable accounting: \$82,680,712 zeroed out.<sup>46</sup>

This may come as a surprise to alumni, who see athletics as the central part of the university experience to which they can make donations: they even built a football stadium named after themselves, "Alumni Stadium." It is a branding exercise that is reflected in the column inches of *The Boston Globe's* coverage of the intricacies of the teams, coaches, and star players that testifies to the way sport is privileged by the institution and its past students, a majority of whom reside after graduation in metropolitan Boston.

Clearly, there are multiple, interlinked contexts and codes at work. They include prioritizing then deprioritizing academic performance. Superior athletic performance is a given. Academics-athletics: mutually exclusive, yet co-existent in colliding contexts. In an effort to ameliorate the contradictions, support for athletes at a Division I college involves attention to academic performance, even while the sport narrative dominates. Just how the contradictions operate is as different as the ambitions and interests of each individual athlete. Prior to the Coronavirus, in a regular semester, a student athlete's context was defined by the BC Provost's Office and Student Athlete Academic Services (SAAS), where advisors assisted with homework, exam preparation, and projects.

Given the academic challenges facing student athletes, SAAS appears to be the best ethical effort by a Division I college to address the grind of practice-performance. Undoubtedly, BC Provost David Quigley and the Provost's Office has a commitment to an environment in which academic success is not merely a fantasy. The office recently ramped up support for athletes. According to an internal note on the Canvas learning platform site in 2019: "In order to better support BC student-athletes, individuals designated by SAAS have been allowed limited access to Canvas courses in which student-athletes are enrolled." Consequently, the names of athletic support staff appeared on class lists in Canvas the Learning Management System, where they observed the academic performance of the athletes they observed, as they produced and uploaded course work to Canvas.

While this kind of surveillance is hardly welcome in "the land of the free" outside the campus, it is part of the teaching environment for college athletes and their instructors. It adds an additional layer to the institutional commitment to get athletes over the graduation line by providing dedicated assistance from academic advisors, even as such surveillance undermines the sense that the classroom is an independent learning space. Online lurking is perhaps a more accurate term than surveillance, because like all forms of digital lurking, the lurker is invested in what happens and acts accordingly. What might be negatively and patronizing referred to as digital hand-holding involves face-to-face tutoring services in programs run out the Yawkey Center, alongside the Alumni Stadium.

For athletes who are weak academically, this service marks the difference between graduating with a degree, and a one- or two-semester flourish before dropping out. Furthermore, as a colleague reminded me when I told them I was writing this, academic advising is especially necessary for student athletes who are “recruited” to Division I colleges. Surprisingly, such recruitment applies to students so outstanding as high school athletes that their academic capacities are not the reason they go to college. Attentive readers may begin to feel the tightening of cognitive pressure at this point, as the dissonance between the formative culture of the Zoomscape coexists with the formation of the somewhat othered athlete.

Further research indicated that BC’s athletic program is measured in part by the Graduation Success Rate < <https://web3.ncaa.org/aprsearch/gsrsearch> > (GSR), a data set available at the NCAA Success Rate website.<sup>47</sup> It shows a BC Student Athlete GSR at 94 percent, although it also shows the 2012–2013 student athlete (first year students in 2011–2012) graduation rate as 77 percent, which is the same percentage of Black male athletes who graduated.<sup>48</sup> The confusing numbers are indicative of how student athletes performed by getting to graduation, over six years. Admittedly, my low comprehension about how the system operates is typical of the underappreciation of the entire edifice of student athletics. However, the GSR translates into metrics for the institution, which translate into competing “composite methodologies” for college rankings that influence student and athlete recruitment, federal funding options, and university status.<sup>49</sup> Confusion abounds, as conscientization mobilizes.

Another central aspect of Division I athletics is the 800-pound contextual gorilla in the stadium: scholarships. This opaque aspect of college life remains largely unspoken, publicly excluded from commentary and silent in the day-to-day activities of the classroom. It is also that fact, as Gerry Canavan and colleagues recently noted, that austerity has become a matter of concern for Jesuit Colleges that make little detailed information about their finances available.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the operational code is that no one speaks about scholarships. This seems fair, as it would identify a classroom divided between students paying “full freight” for tuition, room, and board, and student athletes who may be paying little-to-nothing for their education, or those rare student athletes who engage in the “one and done” exercise – one year of college sport before moving on to professional teams.

College funding—as the student debt crisis in the US has indicated—is an expression of class. What we know about this at BC is unclear. The NCAA is more forthcoming. It noted that 6 percent of high school athletes receive college scholarships, while just 2 percent of college athletes become major professional players. Dissecting that percentage of students in the college mix does little to reveal what the educational system achieves.

At BC, an additional layer of funding is offered through an athletic endowment. The NCAA record for 2018–2019 identified the average athletic scholarship for BC men to be \$31,984, and for women athletes \$26,540, out of the cost of \$53,346 for annual tuition and fees.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, 43 per cent of all undergraduates (non-athletes) received an average scholarship of \$38,307, indicating a pretty generous system for nearly half of BC’s undergraduate population.

Most of the time, the silence around athletic scholarships involves a pedagogical etiquette that does not include discussion of class. Such manners are foundational to the undergraduate classroom learning experience, unfortunately setting a precedent in which the most pressing issues of student life—money, privilege, and future indebtedness—are erased as learning texts.

This is not to say that finance issues are not discussed. One can address the complexities of contemporary college life in conversations with students about debt in the context of rising poverty, inequality, and post-graduation distress due to diminishing salaries and the fading American Dream of home ownership, and as a part of the changing cultural landscape of generalized liberal democratic, neoliberal precarity in the US. Furthermore, to add to the challenge, how can one explore the pathway of upward mobility through college education offered by sports scholarships in a room dominated by non-athletes? The answer is that while these usually untroubled minutiae were part of the “normal” college experience, their relevance evaporated during the 2020 Zoomscape timeframe, like the athletic programs generally. Then, the new cultural formation demanded coronavirus pedagogy, with its mediated, yet foggy intimacy that provoked conscientization.

## Coronavirus Pedagogy

Whatever a smarmy software salesperson may claim, a platform is always only a configuration of algorithms targeting a general set of problems with a computer science solution. A platform in the Coronavirus education context is never capable of the intensity of the classroom engagement that defines the preferred ideals of liberal arts education, or better still the implicit critique of cultural studies. After all, a platform redefines human interactions in virtual ways. And yet, Zoom created the unexpected learning formation of coronavirus pedagogy, as a site for remaking teaching and learning.

Suddenly, in the Zoomscape, students were always available. In recording almost all my classes and uploading them to Canvas, the students could opt for asynchronous learning. And students continued to use the Canvas platform, and email, and in some cases the telephone to ask questions or seek answers to instructions about projects and final exams. Or they disappeared altogether from Zoom and other online interactions. Certainly, the flexibility of the Zoomscape required a new kind of pedagogical discipline, even as the absence of preparation or expertise in online teaching generated the questions that informed conscientization. How would it be possible to do justice to the process of “reflective action” in this new culture? The answer to that question must remain indeterminate under conditions in which the pinhole intimacy of Zoom demanded that attention be paid to the forces at work in the mediated classroom.

### **Open possibilities (with camera)**

Coronavirus pedagogy was a virtual construct, drawing on preexisting systems of authority, remade by the virtual interactivity of the Zoomscape. It heralded a different orientation on the part of faculty, students, and administrators to how teaching happens, opening the potential for conscientization, as a radical formation. Despite that potentiality,

the coronavirus rupture to business-as-usual is open to debate, with contradictions that offer space for critical engagement based on reflection of our own practices, our students, and the institutions in which we are employed. The hope is that by prompting conscientization, this unsteady site of cultural formation can lead to activist efforts in research about how technology can construct better systems of knowledge for emancipation from oppression.

Versions of this experience will play out, perhaps for years, as every semester becomes more unlike every other semester, as recontextualizations expand or expire. Such evolutionary discontinuities will create cultures of undergraduate teaching that will be open to faster change given the unstable conditions that remain.

How will undergraduate teaching change? Will there be more opportunities for innovating emancipatory ideas around the needs and interests of students with online technologies? Will they look into a camera from wherever they are and in the spirit of conscientization, reflect then act on creating new pedagogies of their own? Will faculty extend the prospect for critical education by openly responding to the cultures that push and pull at them? Where, before the pandemic, there was an agglomeration of students in a physical classroom, conscientization can generate the digital enactment of knowledge in the pixilated detail of pinhole opticentricity. How will the new modality of learning translate into better, richer types of pedagogy? Who will be left out as the costs of providing the technology expand? Will instructors be exhausted in the wake? What implications are there for labor as education moves online? In other words, how will academic work be assessed? How will the concerns of poor and working class students be addressed? Can athletes and their knowledge be incorporated into conscientization? What cultural formations are emerging to impact the desire for justice in an oppressive system?


















To answer these questions is to return again to an acknowledgment of the way Gen Z students differ from their predecessors. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Adam Shatz described these students as the generation that

















don't even believe in the (American) dream. They've been ridiculed for their sense of entitlement by those who've enjoyed far more prosperity and, for all the mainstream criticism of identity politics, they understand far better than previous generations that racism is a system, rather than a matter of individual hatred, prejudice or 'ignorance'; they know that its embedded in institutions and that unless it's rooted out, American democracy will remain an unequal and unsafe space for black and brown people.<sup>52</sup>

If this generation of undergraduates is to engage with new pedagogical traditions defined by a simple enough philosophical principle prompted by the mediated context of coronavirus pedagogy and conscientization, there is this: what I learned is that we all have a lot to learn. Of course, it was no surprise that, contrary to its corporate claims, Zoom did not bring happiness. That's the type of claim that matches corporate efforts to manipulate psychic wellbeing, even while expanding the oppression of users in the Zoomscape. Despite that, within the intimacy of the opticentric pinhole context, new opportunities emerged for pedagogical cultural praxis. Certainly, for critical academics with a















commitment to the formation of a culture of emancipatory politics in the tradition of Paulo Freire, the terrain of the Zoomscape offers a vista of contradictory contextual opportunities. The camera will be on.

## Notes

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## Introduction—Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope

by Mattia Fumanti and Elena Zambelli | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Right from the emergence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, national governments and international institutions have been relentlessly qualifying it as an “unprecedented” event. We have been told that the virus sees no color or class and that equal sacrifices from each one of us are and continue to be necessary to contain its spread. We have been instructed to look at the virus in scientific, neutral terms as if we had equal chances of being affected by it—as if its routes, that is, did not follow the roots of sedimented histories of oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and structural violence. This forum departs from such narratives to look at how the current COVID-19 pandemic intersects with other pre-existing and enduring pandemics, such as those produced by racism, capitalism, and speciesism. In building on the emerging critiques by Indigenous, feminist, Black, and queer academics, movements, and activists, the contributions it hosts offer multimedia reflections on affects triggered or evoked by the current pandemic, such as rage, fear, despair, restraint, care, and hope. Coming from different parts of the globe and disciplinary approaches, authors convey the “Corona(virus) a(e)ffects” in multisensorial ways, combining written essays, poetry, videos, and photographs. By contextualizing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic within a historical legacy of structural violence within and across species, this forum moves beyond deceitfully single-focus and temporally flat narrations. In so doing, it provides a space for the expression of radical affectivities of dissent and hope that its outburst has arguably made only more visible and pressing.

**KEYWORDS** racism, affect, temporality, pandemic, COVID-19

Almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> its impact across the globe continues to highlight and reproduce marked structural inequalities between and within countries. Against the mainstream narrative that we are all equally subject to the risk of infection and death, epidemiological data increasingly demonstrates otherwise.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, data shows that the pandemic “disproportionately affected racial and ethnic minority groups,”<sup>3</sup> and its impact on people in prison was five and a half times higher than on those not in prison.<sup>4</sup> In high-income countries, people in migration were found to be “at increased risk of infection” and “disproportionately represented among COVID-19 cases.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the impact of the social distancing regime that most governments across the globe adopted to contain the spread of the virus is hitting harder those social groups living under conditions of structural vulnerability. Individuals working in the informal economy have seen their livelihood jeopardized,<sup>6</sup> and so have people selling sex.<sup>7</sup> People living in displacement have seen their right to seek asylum curtailed.<sup>8</sup> Under stay-at-home conditions, “violence against women and girls (VAWG), and particularly domestic violence,

has intensified.”<sup>9</sup> In the US, LGBT adults and their family members experienced “job loss at higher rates than non-LGBT adults.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, as some of the higher-income countries are emerging from lockdowns, thanks to a rapid, mass vaccination campaign, the pandemic rages in most other countries, which have received only a fraction of the vaccines administered so far. The health gap is such, that recently, the World Health Organization Director-General defined the current situation as a “vaccine apartheid.”<sup>11</sup>

Departing from the single-focus narration of the current COVID-19 pandemic as the source of an “unprecedented” predicament, we—editors of this forum—align ourselves with voices emerging from Indigenous, feminist, Black, and queer academics, movements, and activists that look at its necropolitics<sup>12</sup> as a further instantiation of the coloniality of power.<sup>13</sup> In this introduction, we, first of all, contextualize the present within an “enduring time”<sup>14</sup> of intersecting pandemics, such as those produced by racism, capitalism, and speciesism. Next, we take issues with calls for a return to “normality” by questioning in whose name this desire is being reinstituted. We then offer some theoretical background for our choice to focus on the affects triggered or evoked by and through the current pandemic, followed by a synopsis of the nine contributions that are part of this forum.

## Pandemic Temporalities

First of all, we contend that understanding the current social and political geographies of risk, disease, and death, requires delving into temporalities deeper than the present. In fact, akin to other epidemics and morbidities, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been following the routes traced by longer histories of oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and structural violence.<sup>15</sup> Seen through these different temporalities, the COVID-19 pandemic becomes another event in the long history of physical and viral colonial invasions, the legacies of which enduringly and disproportionately affect People of Color, Indigenous communities, minoritized, and/or impoverished social groups. Indeed, some Indigenous activists indicted “the deadly politics of capitalism” and the “plague” of colonialism as the actual sources of infection.<sup>16</sup> The juxtaposition between the images of the coffins of the coronavirus victims buried in Manaus<sup>17</sup> and the destruction of the Amazon forest<sup>18</sup> tragically epitomizes how Indigenous people’s lives and lands are made disposable and disposed of, along with the futurity we share on planet Earth.

Black people “have been talking about the pandemic of racism for centuries,”<sup>19</sup> and some scholars suggested that to be Black today amounts to carrying—or perhaps more poignantly, to have been inflicted with—“a ‘pre-existing condition.’”<sup>20</sup> Looking back to the US slavery regime, Brandi Summers suggests “One might even consider the black experience as a kind of never-ending quarantine.”<sup>21</sup> As Christina Sharpe reminds us, for Black people existing in the wake, “the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”<sup>22</sup> However, whilst the wake produces Black death and terror, “we black people, everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being in the wake.”<sup>23</sup> One cannot help but think of George Floyd’s last moments, his pleading “I can’t breathe,” as a global call to insist on

Black existing in/into and through the wake of the current moment, as shaped by the legacy of intersecting and enduring pandemics.

## Whose Normality?

Secondly, and relatedly, we need to interrogate who is the subject uttering the statement that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is “unprecedented.” In other words, as put forward by AIDS activist and queer scholar Gary Kinsman, we need to ask who is the “public” of “public health” and how that “public” is socially constructed to include or exclude people across multiple axes of social differentiation.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been raging for almost fifty years now. Queer people had to radically reimagine their social worlds to survive it, as they reconfigured the spaces and practices of intimacy, weaved webs of mutual solidarity and care, and turned mourning into a political protest against their erasure and disposability.<sup>25</sup> As Hemmings recently underlined, Eve Sedgwick’s writings at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic called for the use of the “viral” as a mean to cultivate refusal, resistance, and value “alternative epistemologies as well as lives: ones that are devalued, pushed aside, or mocked. Gossip, knowledges needed for survival, lurking instincts.”<sup>26</sup> Sedgwick, Hemmings reminds us, calls these “nonce taxonomies”:

they spread rather than move up or down; they ooze and jump horizontally, along care capillaries and up and down phone trees. They are the technologies of the powerless that let others know what is safe and what (or who) should be avoided. For 1990s Sedgwick, nonce-taxonomies are not metaphors; they are the knowledges that keep people with AIDS alive within communities. They provide circuits of intimacy that are not rooted in hermetically sealed “households” but in chosen family, shared histories and modes of touching others that have always been innovative.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, in contemporary public discourse, this history and living legacy of painfully hard-won knowledge and practices have been ignored, reflecting the devaluing of queer lives,<sup>28</sup> and of the lives of people living in lower-income countries. Eventually, we—editors of this forum—would like to suggest that what qualifies the COVID-19 pandemic as “unprecedented” is less the nature of its effects, such as its deadliness and the adaptive regimes developed to survive it, but more the scale of their impact on the life of the privileged, normative subjectivities living in higher-income countries. Against this background, calls for a return to “normality” appear to us editors and to the contributors to this forum as a form of “cruel optimism”: an attachment to an “ordinary life” that is premised on “the attrition or the wearing out of the subject,”<sup>29</sup> and on the continuation of the deadly structural inequalities which it rests upon and reproduces. It is the normality

of clogged highways, filthy air, meaningless work, disorganized health provision, mindless consumption, bulging prisons, abandoned homeless populations, siloed knowledge practices, growth-based economies wrecking the planet, stratification and abjection across race, class, gender, and hemisphere, and overpaid masters of the universe returned to their thrones.<sup>30</sup>

# Affectivities of Dissent and Hope

As the COVID-19 pandemic unraveled, we had to learn to navigate the shift from a world that was “close, collective, viscous, and dirty” to one that, suddenly, “had become distant, individual, dry, and hygienic.”<sup>31</sup> Amid these uncertain waters, as editors, we found ourselves swinging relentlessly between dissent and trust, hope and despair, loneliness and new forms of mutuality. Eventually, rather than waiting for a definitive resolution to these affective “pandemic swings,” we came to acknowledge that such instability characterizes life not *under*, but *with* intersecting pandemics. Our choice to focus this forum on the affective dimension of this ongoing, complex predicament, recognizes that affects hold together the discursive, the material, and the visceral dimension of human and nonhuman life experience. Affect “arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon.”<sup>32</sup> It is “found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages of variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.”<sup>33</sup> Following Sarah Ahmed, we conceive affect as a “form of capital” that emerges from the circulation, distribution, and unequal accumulation of emotions “across a social as well as a psychic field.”<sup>34</sup> It is, therefore, organized in “affective economies”<sup>35</sup> in which human and nonhuman subjects are hierarchically organized based on their intelligibility, visibility, and value. Among humans, these hierarchies reflect and reproduce normative assemblages of gender, race, class, citizenship, sexuality, ability, age, and other markers of social differentiation. Species are likewise hierarchically organized. As Bruno Latour famously argued, the paradigm of humankind’s dominion over nature lies at the heart of white Western colonial modernity and its cognate (racialized) temporality.<sup>36</sup> Affects stick differently to different bodies and objects engendering and reproducing different forms and levels of privilege and disadvantage; deservingness to be protected or to be left to die prematurely; to be grieved viscerally or to be lost and disposed of unaffectionately.<sup>37</sup>

Affects’ effects—or, as we have called them, their “a(e)ffects”—carry genealogies rooted in enduring histories of oppression, exploitation, and dispossession. Inspired by the emerging critiques and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by Black, Indigenous, feminist, and queer academics, with this forum we editors wished to offer a space to interrogate the narratives of the current predicament as “normality interrupted.” We felt the necessity of doing so amidst dystopian imaginaries forecasting the suppression, *ad infinitum*, of collective expressions of “live” political dissent on public health grounds and the tightening of ever more molecular biopolitical governmentalities. As scholars of colonialism, postcolonialism, gender studies, and critical race theory, we editors looked critically at the flourishing of publications documenting and narrating the COVID-19 pandemic mostly in the style of observational and single-focus diaries. We found these particularly problematic in the context of the recent debates on decolonization and the positionality of white scholars, including ourselves, writing from a position of privilege in academia. The forum became our dissenting response to what we feared would be the flattening out of the pandemic through a particular Western heteronormative gaze.

Joining Jack Halberstam's passionate call to seize the present as a "[t]ime for frenzy,"<sup>38</sup> we thus invited academics, artists, and activists to draw from the affective registers of hope, fear, rage, care, desire to reflect on forms and imaginaries of political organizing at the time and in the aftermath of the current pandemic. We called for a scholarship privileging "emotional intimacy"<sup>39</sup> and "radical empathy"<sup>40</sup> as modes of witnessing people's experiences, recording their narratives, and overall, of being in the present—a scholarship whose ethos is oppositional and transformative and oriented towards fulfillment of concrete utopias.<sup>41</sup>

Shortly after our call went out in May 2020, the US was shaken by massive protests against police brutality following the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, with demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement taking place in over sixty countries. Relentlessly, rage against systemic injustices and longings for different futures have been erupting in and/or fueling protests in many parts of the world: against the presidential election results in Belarus; the tightening of already draconian abortion laws in Poland; state irresponsibility in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, and many struggles more. As we write this introduction, over a year later, a ceasefire agreement has recently been reached between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip, after an eleven-day conflict constituting the latest instantiation of Palestinians' ongoing predicament in the face of a settler-colonial project.<sup>42</sup> Amid the enduring pandemic-borne uncertainties, one thing appears to us to shine with clarity, and this is that public health restrictions on gatherings have not hindered many people's desire to address and overcome long-held grievances by collectively taking to the streets.

## The Contributions in this Forum

This forum contributes to a growing interdisciplinary scholarship on political affectivities<sup>43</sup> by expanding the repertoire of affects through which humans can collectively imagine and feel the possibilities of dissent and hope within and across species. Coming from different parts of the world—Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and the US—and different disciplines, authors used a range of means to convey the "corona(virus) a(e)ffects" in multisensorial ways, combining written texts with audio/visual materials. Some of these contributions speak of the affectivities emerging in the moment of reckoning with one's dissent with the world-as-experienced. Others speak of the texturing of relations of care emerging among and/or across species, as a "praxis of radical politics that provides spaces of hope in precarious times."<sup>44</sup> Others suggest looking at the times we are going through as one in which new ways of imagining a collective otherwise can take root.

The first set of four contributions explores the political affectivities of care and dissent emerging in the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it intersects with other enduring pandemics.

"Public Space as Infrastructure of Care: The Affective Dynamics of Protomagias Square During the Pandemic," <

[infra-structure-care-protomagias-square-pandemic-kallianos-karathanasis/](https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/infra-structure-care-protomagias-square-pandemic-kallianos-karathanasis/)> by Yannis Kallianos and Pafsanias Karathanasis, explores the transformation of a public square in Athens, Greece, into a space shaping and engendering "*infra-structure* relations and networks of care." Against the risk of retreat into the realm of the private and the privatized fostered by the recasting of physical proximity as a public (health) threat, the authors suggest reading the grassroots collective practices of self-care and care for each other they witnessed emerging as "alternative and 'different ideas of publicness.'" <sup>45</sup>

"On Witnessing a Riot," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/on-witnessing-a-riot-brooks-richardson/>> by Andrew Brooks and Michael Richardson, discusses the affectivities arising and molded through the global circulation of a mobile phone-recorded video of the protests that erupted in Los Angeles following the murder of George Floyd. In the vibrancy of the affectivities released and produced through these images, the authors see the potentialities of a new albeit yet undefined structure of feeling<sup>46</sup>—one which "dissolves oppressions instead of sustaining them."

In "Feelings, Fascism, and Futures," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/feelings-fascism-futures-enzerink/>> Suzanne Enzerink delves into the racialization of "restraint," which is conceived both as "the nerve center of our feelings" and, following Bonilla-Silva, a category "produced by and routed through racial domination."<sup>47</sup> This contribution shows the multiple ways in which the practices and representations of political restraint or lack thereof were racialized during and beyond the pandemic, focusing in particular on the effects of structural racism in the US and institutional stagnation in Lebanon. Notwithstanding (realist?) fears that the aftermath of the pandemic will bring a return "to normal," the author also foregrounds the political potentialities of the new, pandemic-borne, self-organized infrastructures of care.

"Within and Against Racial Segregation: Notes from Italy's Encampment Archipelago," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/within-against-racial-segregation-italys-encampment-archipelago-peano/>> by Irene Peano, reflects on the exceptional and the ordinary of the pandemic as it is lived and experienced by West African migrants working in Southern Italy's agricultural districts in highly exploitative conditions. The author reads the COVID-19-borne measures of isolation and segregation in a continuum with the pre-pandemic past. Against this background of structural violence, Peano invites us to read some migrants' refusal to accept the "surplus of segregation" brought by the pandemic as a form of resistance.

The second set of two contributions foregrounds affectivities of disorientation and liminality<sup>48</sup> emerging amid the COVID-19 pandemic, encompassing fears of a return to "normality," reminiscences of the silenced past, and hope in what can come afterward.

"Bewilderment, Hope, and Despair" < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/bewilderment-hope-despair-mouritzen-mcgowan-samson/>> is a collective and poetic narration of a state of in-between-ness, rising amidst despair for the current predicament and hope in new worlds to come. By relinquishing the allure of "normality," authors Lasse Mouritzen, Madeleine Kate McGowan, and Kristine Samson explore various states of affect "like temporary landscapes or glimpses of a new world." While allowing the

surfacing of the ruins of the “other worlds, previous times” on whose spoils the present has been rapaciously built upon, they suggest that the pandemic-borne restlessness, disorientation, and despair, also enable the conditions for collectively imagining an otherwise.

Paulina Lanz’s “Cycles of Quotidian Pandemic Instances: Voice(less) Stories from 1918” < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/cycles-of-quotidian-pandemic-instances-voiceless-stories-from-1918-lanz/>> provides temporal depth to the present-day affectivities engulfing and entangling humans living amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It invites us to attune to the vibrato of the hum—the modality of the quiet that connects us to the feelings of loss we cannot articulate into words<sup>49</sup>—and with it, to the knowledge of a silenced past. By retrieving the memories of what went unlearned across waves of “history, sound, and pandemics,” the author suggests that the hum can serve “as a collective resonance for solidarities and empathy.”

The final third set of three contributions underlines the potentialities of learning to practice—in and through the pandemic—more equal, inclusive relationalities within and across species.

“The Green Color of Grief: Spider-Human Dreams,” < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/the-green-color-of-grief-spider-human-dreams-stankovic-paganelli/>> by Snežana Stanković and Linda Paganelli, is the “dream-time diary” of a Spider-Human. Moving across space with its silk trains, the narrator evokes the stillness, silence, and grief emerging from the pandemic-afflicted cities. In so doing, it leverages a post-human critique of the political economy underpinning the unequal valuing of humans, as foregrounded by the premature and unmourned death of so many people. Drawing from Christina Sharpe’s notion of the “wake,”<sup>50</sup> and Anna Tsing’s call for “collaborative survival,” it invites us to think of mutuality within and across species.<sup>51</sup>

In “Plants, Vegetables, Lawn: Radical Solidarities in Pandemic Times,” Gi < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/plants-vegetables-lawn-radical-solidarities-pandemic-times-carabelli/>> ulia Carabelli discusses the affectivities of “joy, hope, and reassurance” that humans relayed while caring for their plants. Rather than an apology for retreating into the home and/or into nature in search of individualized comfort and safety, the author reads these caring relationships politically,<sup>52</sup> for the emancipatory potential that radical interspecies solidarities hold in the construction of “more just and inclusive” futures.

The theme of hope reemerges powerfully in the forum’s final contribution: “Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic,” < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/finding-joy-elegy-poetry-pandemic-karioris/>> by Frank G. Karioris. By drawing from the poetry that blossomed during the pandemic, the author reflects on the quarantine as a fertile, seeding time and an opportunity to understand “the importance of interrelationality and change” for moving towards a post-pandemic world. Like the multitude of leaves on a tree, Karioris invites us to “foster connection between fractured insurgencies,”<sup>53</sup> and to “break away from our rotting and towards a growth that is contingent and reliant on community, collaboration, and creativity.”



In reflecting on the contributions to this forum, we sense that the pandemic, despite the magnitude of its ongoing tragedy, has opened up the possibilities for recasting the future through the affective registers of dissent and hope for existing in/into and through the world. As Amanda Gorman so eloquently evoked,

When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?

The loss we carry. A sea we must wade.

We braved the belly of the beast.





We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,












and the norms and notions of what 'just' is isn't always justice.<sup>54</sup>


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## Notes

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## Public Space as Infrastructure of Care: The Affective Dynamics of Protomagias Square During the Pandemic

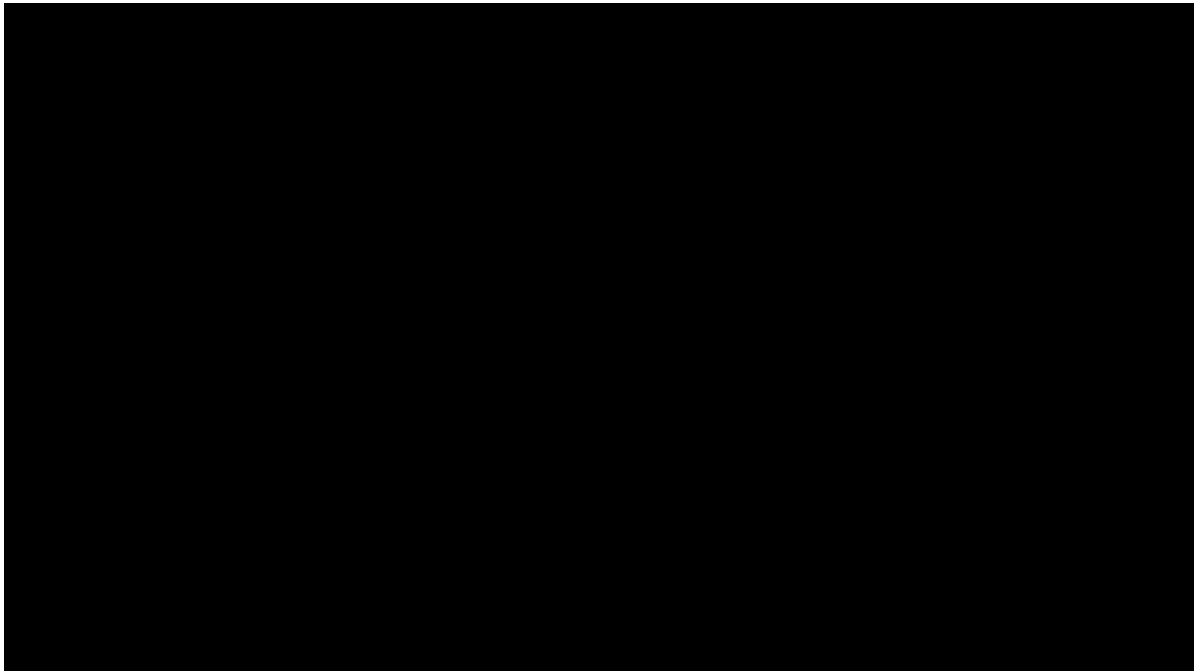
by Yannis Kallianos and Pafsanias Karathanasis | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Our contribution puts forward an examination of public spaces as infrastructures of care. The eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the “social distancing” measures imposed by several governments around the world, transformed the very use and conceptualization of urban public spaces. In Athens, Greece, public space, which had already been in different ways at the forefront of multifarious crises since 2010, reemerged, once again, as a critical site of sociopolitical antagonism. Public spaces, such as squares, became central places where people could come together to share knowledge and emotions, collectively alleviate anxieties, and thus (re)negotiate their positionality in the city. Such formations and enactments of social connection, affectivity, and antagonism, reflect the entanglement between everyday life and the *political*, and also draw attention to the association of public space with practices of care for collective well-being during precarious times. During the ever-increasing securitization and policing of urban spaces in Athens, in which everyday life has come to be ever more permeated by precarity and uncertainty, public spaces have been reenacted as safe and more inclusive environments where people can be and act together. Our contribution also employs a video to render more intelligible the affective interconnectedness of sounds, images, bodies, materialities, and practices in public space. By attending to the affective dynamics of a public square in central Athens, we examine the entanglements between the sociopolitical production of public space and forms of care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**KEYWORDS** public space, care, pandemic, Athens, multimodality, Greece, infrastructure



## Protomagias Square - A public space of care durin...



Filmed and edited by Pafsanias Karathanasis. Research by Pafsanias Karathanasis and Yannis Kallianos.

### Introduction

To walk this narrow path, one's pace must be hesitant, yet confident. Both qualities are necessary for carrying out the balancing act needed to stay safe. This is the narrow underground median strip that separates the two sides of Moustoxidi street, in central Athens. Despite the fact that it can be considered unsafe, this passage is used regularly as many people, especially during the night, consider it safer to cross than the square above.





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Image01.Passage-Yannis-Kallianos.jpg> >

Figure 1. The underground passage of Moustoxidi street. Photograph from a moving car by Pafsanias Karathanasis.

This observation leads us to the main argument of this paper. Since the pandemic erupted, Protomagias (First of May) Square, which is situated above Moustoxidi street, has transformed into an “affective infrastructure”<sup>1</sup> formative of care. During the first lockdown, Protomagias Square began to be swarmed with people.<sup>2</sup> Almost instantly, it transformed from a space that was mainly used by local and often marginalized communities, and considered by some unsafe after dark, to one that accommodated numerous people of all ages and of different cultural backgrounds. Soccer, cricket, boxing, walking, running, and other physical activities occupied a major part of the square. The space was also used for discussions, hanging out, drinking in small groups, singing and dancing in semiprivate parties or at impromptu concerts, and even political events like assemblies and discussions. Being one of the few public open spaces in this densely built area of the center that remained accessible during the lockdown, it hosted simultaneously a variety of collective and individual everyday practices. Even though the square is of moderate size, the diverse activities that took place there did not exclude each other, but rather formed a sense of collective everyday togetherness; a way of being in public space that was reconstituted around notions, affects, and practices of care. Eventually, it made possible an essential social and “affective practice”<sup>3</sup> of balancing between two harmful situations; between the danger of being infected or infecting others, and the danger of being isolated. It transformed into a safe(r) space where care, which as Gabriela Cabaña, drawing on David Graeber,<sup>4</sup> argues is “any labor that is directed at maintaining or enhancing another’s freedom,”<sup>5</sup> could be exercised.

In this paper, we approach care as a “social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life.”<sup>6</sup> Within this context, care has

been strongly associated with public space as a way to create a "*sharing infrastructure*" that advances "mutual support."<sup>7</sup> Such a perspective draws attention to the infrastructural qualities of public space, to the ways in which its materiality, along with its everyday relational and processual dynamics, are interrelated with "the movement or patterning of social form,"<sup>8</sup> and thus have the capacity to be co-formative of "how affinities take shape, or not."<sup>9</sup> It also points to the fact that infrastructural materialities, such as public spaces, can "mobilise" affect and "feelings which can be deeply political."<sup>10</sup> Here, we argue that certain forms and modalities of care during the pandemic have been inflected by the material, affective, socio-cultural, and political registers of public space. It is through the different material and emotional manifestations of sociality and solidarity which have emerged in the square that particular forms of care have been made possible. Such a labor of care, as we demonstrate, has not only alleviated the effects of the pandemic and the strict measures which have been imposed to control it, but has also helped people to collectively renegotiate their positioning in the city. Our intervention is based on our own experiences of frequenting the square before and during the pandemic crisis. By choosing to include in our contribution not only photographs, but also a video, we present a perspective that renders more intelligible the visual, acoustic, intimate, and affective forms of everyday care. Following the sensory approach, that is central in current visual ethnography,<sup>11</sup> our observational video "travels" through the different places of the square, during day and night, to allow the viewer to get a *sense* of the space and the unfolding multiple practices of care.

## Athenian Public Space in Never-Ending Trouble

The COVID-19 pandemic erupted in Greece during the last days of February 2020. Within a month, very strict measures had already been employed by the Greek government, and they led to the closure of public educational institutions, restaurants, shops, and so on. On March 23, a complete lockdown was imposed that restricted all "non-necessary" movement. This was enforced through strict and extended policing and surveillance that also entailed the obligation to indicate, through SMS or a "movement permit form," the reason and the details for each movement under threat of high fines. Within the context of this pandemic juncture, public spaces reemerged as critical sites of sociopolitical antagonism. Reenacted in accordance with ideas of "social distancing," the governance and policing of public spaces have been reconfigured in light of their recasting as potentially contagious places.<sup>12</sup> The term "social distancing" has been criticized for sustaining and reinforcing existing inequalities and exclusions, as well as for the potentially threatening political consequences that it entails.<sup>13</sup> Although such processes further intensify the biopolitical aspect of urban governance and planning, in Athens (the right to public space has constantly been in trouble and under threat.<sup>14</sup> This is evidenced by both past and present urban development and surveillance projects, and by the increasing attempts to privatize and gentrify areas of the city, especially after the Athens 2004 Olympic Games and the eruption of the 2010 economic crisis.<sup>15</sup>

In Athens and in Greece more generally, the privatization of public space has been strongly associated with the rise of commercial "third spaces" that often occupy large parts of it.

According to Setha Low and Alan Smart, “third spaces are commercial establishments such as bars, restaurants, gyms, malls, barbershops, and other places frequented between work and home.”<sup>16</sup> Commercial “third spaces” rapidly grew to become mainstream sites for meeting up, socializing, and performing the modern self, thus, in a way, replacing the traditional coffeehouse (*kafeneio*)—which is an exclusively male space.<sup>17</sup>



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Image02.Trouble-Yannis-Kallianos.jpg>

Figure 2. “Trouble everywhere.” Writings on the walls of Protomagias Square. Photo by Pafsanias Karathanasis.

The last two decades have also been marked by important attempts to reclaim public space in the everyday, away from institutionalized politics. Hence, the city has seen the emergence of critical collective practices associated with the right to public space, such as mass demonstrations, occupations, guerrilla gardening, graffiti, and various local and neighbourhood initiatives. This urban legacy has been co-formative of the practices which emerged during the pandemic at the Protomagias Square. Contrary to official and state narratives that impose social distancing, these everyday activities put forward an understanding of public space as an infrastructure of care, through which existing dominant forms and norms of sociality and interaction could be challenged and transformed.

## Protomagias Square: A Critical Public Space

Protomagias Square sits between the Pedion tou Areos (PtA), the largest park in central Athens, and the former Evelpidon Military Academy complex, which now includes the main court of justice, the Hellenic National Defence College (HNDC), and a grove (also Evelpidon). After its redevelopment in the 1980s, Moustoxidi street was moved underground and Protomagias Square was constructed. In the pre-COVID era, apart from a crossing and a bridge, the square was mainly used by migrants and youth to hang out and play dominoes or cricket, and as an open space for kids to play in. During the first lockdown, Protomagias Square remained as one of the few public open spaces in downtown Athens. The massive increase in the number of people using the square, and thus in recreational, physical, and other activities, is also associated with the shutting down of all “third spaces” and with the temporary closure of the neighbouring park. This change in the square’s use reflects an essential need for social interaction, emotional support, and for being (in and) part of a social public arena during the pandemic. It is within this context that Protomagias was reenacted as an “affective infrastructure” that became a critical point of reference. During this period, it was regularly full of people who used it in a variety of ways. Eventually, during the summer, it became a meeting point for the wider metropolitan center.

To understand the kind of care that public space can engender, we approach Protomagias as a constellation of diverse but co-constitutive socio-spatial and affective forms, relations, and processes. These made possible a kaleidoscope of activities that resulted in the blending of different sounds, movements, smells, and other affective dynamics, thus creating a sense of intimacy and togetherness that permeated collective use of space. This, in turn, produced a public arena through which the anxiety, self-isolation, and uncertainty generated by the pandemic and its management could be confronted.

We identify three main spaces in the square in which such everyday activities take place: First, there is a wide-open area that occupies the largest part of the square. This area is separated between a higher level, situated in front of the HNDC, and a lower level next to a private café and one of the entrances to the park. Over the past years, the higher level has been regularly used by Pakistani and Afghan migrants as a cricket field. The lower level is mainly the site where kids play and ride their bicycles. Moreover, between these two levels there is a small skateboard and bicycle ramp, which is also systematically used by youth.





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Image03.OpenArea-Yannis-Kallianos-1.jpg> >

Figure 3. The open area in the middle of the square in the afternoon. Photo by Pafsanias Karathanasis.

Second, and towards the southern end of the large open space, sits a *Platanus* (plane tree) in the middle of a square-built bench. For some years, it has kept a community of Albanian migrants company. They gather under its shade to play dominoes, drink beer, and discuss, thereby creating a self-organized communal space.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this community has assembled a considerable number of upcycled chairs and tables over the course of the years. While, during the day, these are used by the community, at night various other groups and people who frequent the park also use them to gather around to drink, eat, or even celebrate important personal events.<sup>19</sup> This *Platanus* constitutes part of a shared "affective infrastructure" which gives rise to diverse socialities that do not exclude each other, thus becoming formative of critical spatiotemporal arrangements of care during the pandemic.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Image04.ChairsTables-Yannis-Kallianos.jpg> >

Figure 4. Chairs and tables gathered around the Platanus at different times of the day. Photo by Pafsanias Karathanasis.

The third site is a small amphitheatre (*theatraki*) made out of concrete that is used for a variety of purposes. Apart from being a space of gathering, celebration, or casual discussion, the theatraki has also been used for political assemblies and events. This is also due to the fact that several grassroots political groups and collectives have been deprived of their usual gathering spaces. In this way, the theatraki has been playing an important role in facilitating the continuation of unmediated political grassroots action during the pandemic.





< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Image05.Theatraki-Yannis-Kallianos.jpg> >

Figure 5. The theatraki early in the morning. Photo by Pafsanias Karathanasis.

## Public Space: A "Matter" of Care

The various everyday collective practices at play in Protomagias Square offer important insights into the ways in which the socio-material and affective dynamics of public space have been shaping forms of care during the pandemic. By providing a place in which to be together, and in which to participate in the production of inclusive and unmediated practices, the square has transformed into a safe(r) space where affective manifestations of interdependence and sociality have helped to collectively (re)negotiate and alleviate everyday fears and anxieties. Care, then, as an everyday practice and capacity to "maintain, continue, and repair our 'world'" towards collective well-being,<sup>20</sup> has been woven into fragile socio-spatial and affective forms of being and acting in public space.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Image06.Community-Yannis-Kallianos.jpg> >

Figure 6. "Nothing like community." Writings on the walls of Protomagias Square. Photo by Pafsanias Karathanasis.

Here, we identify at least two main interconnected and interdependent qualities of care inscribed in the square: self-care and care for each other. The first is embodied in the practices that people manifest into caring for themselves. Physical exercise or even just the state of being in public space constitute part of such care. Second, care for each other is evident in the various ways in which parents, friends, dog owners, and those belonging to wider social networks act as caregivers. By regularly maintaining their social ties, and by offering emotional support, they also sustain the well-being of all those who form part of their everyday social networks, neighborhood, and affinities. Such forms of caring have also been enacted via everyday practices of socio-spatial and material repair and maintenance. The mending of chairs, tables, and other shared materialities surrounding Platanus, is an important indication that issues of care "also take shape in the environments we inhabit and move through."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, practices concerning the care for each other are also strongly demonstrated in political practices that challenge authoritarianism, injustice, and everyday exclusions. Assemblies, concerts, and other political events in solidarity with migrants, offer care by imagining and creating inclusive spaces, as well as by actively supporting people in need. They represent an important quality of care as "the expression of solidarity versus charity" that is "mobilized as a response to neglect or catastrophe."<sup>22</sup> These two forms of care point to its capacity to be shared and manifested "according to the demands of the situation."<sup>23</sup>

Overall, these public and plural materialities, visibilities, and affective forms of care, which have been generated through public space, have been crucial during the pandemic. They constitute critical "affective care relations" that "co-create others relationally in a non-








alienating, non-exploitable way.”<sup>24</sup> Crucial is the fact that, throughout the day, one practice was replaced by or overlapped with another, without impeding their reemergence. This helped foster the development of social connections and ties in public space, not by simply not-excluding, but by actively nurturing the “breadth, depth, and textures of sociality” through the production of a communal, public, and shared “social infrastructure”<sup>25</sup> Instead of implying a single homogenous community, however, these practices of care signify the emergence of (plural) social and collective potentialities that are shaped, articulated, and manifested around the dynamics of the communal in public space. Here, we draw on Gautam Bhan, Teresa Caldeira, Kelly Gillespie, and AbdouMalik Simone’s conceptualisation of the collective as “plural and not necessarily agreed upon: it is just shared in its contradictions, ambiguities, multiplicities, and partialities.”<sup>26</sup> Practising care in Protomagias Square became part of a need and a demand. This public enactment of care in the square comprises part of an everyday ongoing collective and affective labor of *co-curating* the balancing act of staying safe between contagion and isolation. Entailed in the conceptualisation of public space as infrastructure of care is the potential for the engendering of alternative and “different ideas of publicness,”<sup>27</sup> which in times of social distancing have proven to be ever more crucial.


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## On Witnessing a Riot

by Andrew Brooks and Michael Richardson | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

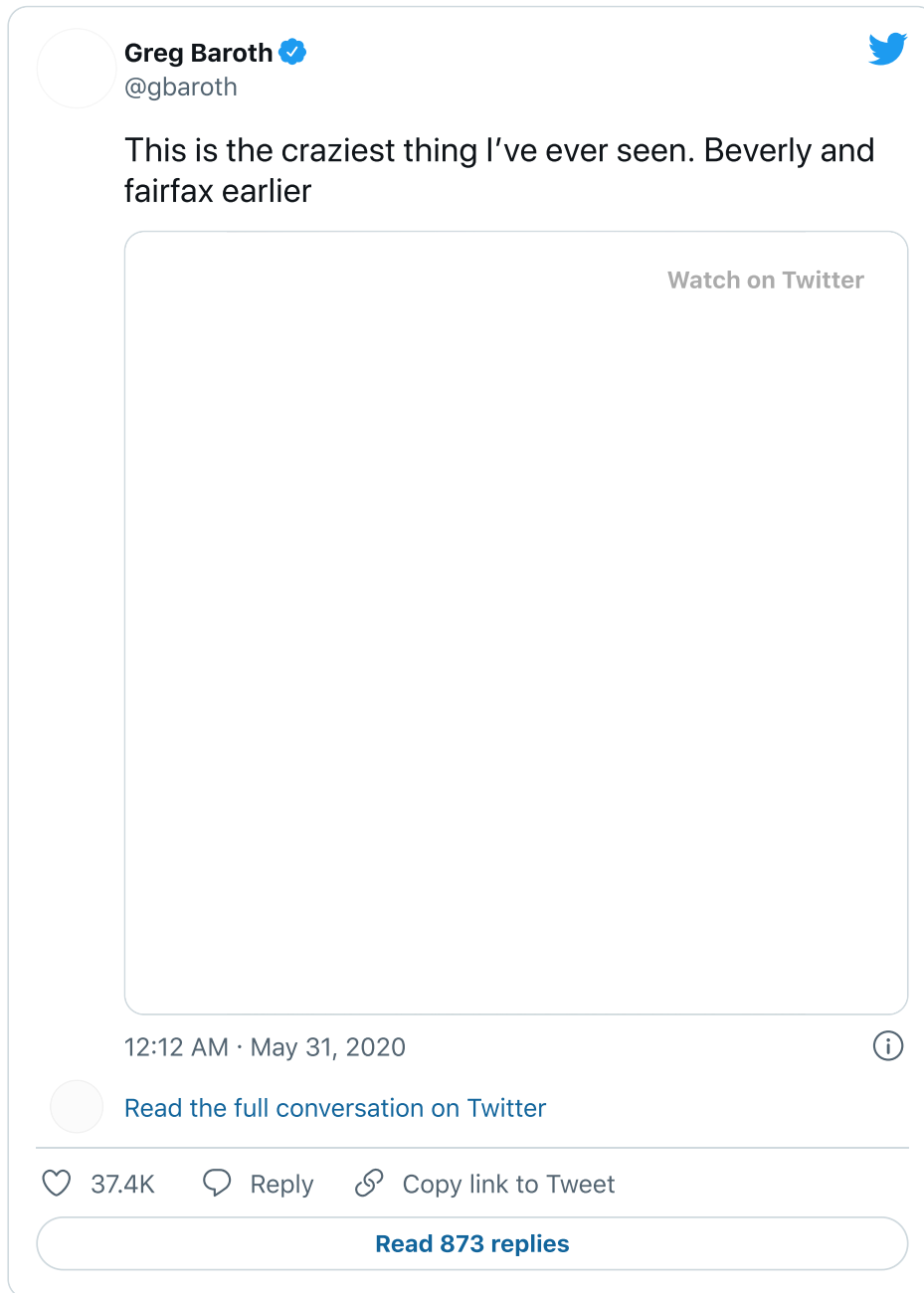
**ABSTRACT** In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police has sparked protests and riots around the world. The policing of the pandemic reveals the racial biases inherent to law enforcement and state-led discipline, laying bare ongoing infrastructural inequalities that render racialized subjects more vulnerable to premature death at the hands of police and public health systems alike. With the video embedded in the article, we guide readers through thirty-nine seconds of rioting in Los Angeles on May 31, 2020, shot on a mobile phone and circulated virally on Twitter. The affected body of the witness indexes both the intensity of the event and the embodied experience of the witness, establishing a relation between the two. The experiential aesthetics of the video exceeds the content and this affectivity circulates with its mediation and movement through networked platforms. Such forms of affective witnessing allow for an attunement to political struggle that occurs through what Hortense Spillers would call the analytic of the flesh. Thinking at the intersection of Black studies, affect theory, and media studies, we argue that the flesh is an affective register crucial to the building of global anti-racist solidarities towards abolition.

**KEYWORDS** affect, politics, protest, Los Angeles, riot, abolition, witnessing, mediation

## At Fairfax and Beverly

The shaky handheld camera—a cellphone in portrait mode—sweeps left then right then left again as it slowly moves down North Fairfax Avenue in Los Angeles toward the intersection with Beverly Boulevard. Palm trees tower indifferently above the scene, lining the wide street. A billboard for Chase Bank looms ahead. At street level, movement is everywhere: two people run into frame pushing an industrial dumpster down the middle of the street; a pair of cop cars make wild U-turns and lurch dangerously through the intersection looking for an escape route; people hurl bottles and trash and rocks and other objects at the police cars desperately fleeing the scene. The camera spins 180 degrees and shows the remnants of a burnt out police car, tagged with graffiti that reads “FLOYD.” Whirling back, a mass of protesters swarms the now-vacant intersection. The camera swings urgently to the left and lingers on a second police car, also burnt, with protestors standing atop holding signs to the sky that declare their dissent. A cacophonous noise builds around the camera as it pans one way and then another, unsure what to focus on in a scene of so many moving parts. Rendered in black and white, this thirty-nine seconds of footage has a cinematic quality, as if it might be the opening shot of a film depicting a revolution in full swing. Beginning with a medium-wide establishing shot, the camera

documents the turbulent scene from its edges. Moving with the rhythm of a body in step, the camera pulls in on the action until it is immersed in the swarm of people and the din of noise. The footage becomes swept up in the mass of the riot, moving with its energy, inseparable from the disorientation and possibility of this organic collectivity.



Greg Baroth (@gbaroth) tweeting an Instagram story from @calebslife posted on May 30, 2020.

Shot and uploaded by an Instagram user and then shared on Twitter on May 31, 2020, the video captures Los Angeles in a state of riot. This riot is one of many that swept through the United States in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer

six days earlier. These urban revolts took place as the COVID-19 pandemic was sweeping the world, bringing the global economy to a grinding halt, and reconfiguring social and spatial relations. Yet despite the risk posed by the novel coronavirus, protesters took to the streets *en masse* in acts of collective resistance against racism, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>1</sup> Vulnerability to premature death plays out along race and class lines in relation to both the COVID-19 pandemic and police brutality—lack of access to health infrastructure goes hand-in-hand with the intensification of policing as more and more workers in the deindustrialized economies of the United States are excluded from capitalist modes of production and the conditional safety of the wage relation. Racism is a public health issue that permeates every aspect of the environment. “The weather,” writes Christina Sharpe, “is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and the total climate is antiblack.”<sup>2</sup> These uprisings—riots and looting, burning police stations, demands to abolish the police, the building of alternate social infrastructures—respond not only to the constraint of Black life and the killing of Black people, but to the inequity of racial capitalism itself. But what are we to make of these moments of witnessing and their viral circulation? Do they contain an affectivity that enables us to attune to what Raymond Williams termed the “structure of feeling” of the moment we are living in? And how might this attunement to affective forces and intensities relate to the emergence of a revolutionary subject intent on the abolition of racial capitalism?

## Affective Witnessing

Captured in the footage is a state of excess, intensities spilling and sparking between bodies in motion as they enter and leave the frame. “Things flash up,” writes Kathleen Stewart, “events alive with some kind of charge.”<sup>3</sup> What else is this but the flashing up of the charged event, caught in saturated black and white, in the familiar vertical frame of the smartphone, released into the wildness of the digital? What do we witness in these furious, excessive seconds? Things that might be read as signifiers—cop car, masked face, surging bodies—whip through the scene, never at rest, always tipping over into the next fierce trajectory, giving way to other bodies, objects, constellations. Witnessing here is affective: the witnessing of affect and affect as the modality of witnessing itself.<sup>4</sup> As the frame swings from side to side, slowing in response to clusters of objects and bodies, as it drives forward towards the intersection with Beverly Boulevard, it carries with it the embodied relation to the scene of the cameraperson: an urgent presence, a being affected by the vital frenzy of so much matter, energy, and noise coursing through place. Mediated by the affordances of the camera, by the rendering into black and white, by its circulations on Instagram and then Twitter, this thirty-nine seconds of footage testifies to the surging affects of the scene, of being pulled toward and into the crowd.

The aesthetics of this event raises the stakes of the scene and renders it cinematic, even before its politics arrive in wailing sirens, burnt out cars, throbbing bodies. Here is subject formation in action, but with no narrowing down to the individual, no diminishment of the collective. “Like a live wire, the subject channels what’s going on around it in the process



of its own self-composition," writes Stewart. "Formed by the coagulation of intensities, surfaces, sensations, perceptions, and expressions, it's a thing composed of encounters and the spaces and events it traverses or inhabits."<sup>5</sup> In the oscillations and lingerings of the camera, the footage stands in for this co-composition of the witnessing subject who holds the phone but it also captures the coalescence and co-composition of the collectivity of the crowd into which the witness dissolves—a riotous, swarming agency set against the state.

Liked and retweeted thousands of times, the clip slides into our Twitter feeds on the other side of the world: Bidjigal, Gadigal, and Wangal Country in Sydney, Australia, in the last days of pandemic lockdown. We watch it from a distance, far removed from the riot unfolding in those streets, but with protests for Blak Indigenous life<sup>6</sup> taking shape in our own body politic. Made possible by mobile technologies, global infrastructures, and proprietary algorithms that are the product of racial capitalism, distributed and mediated witnessing is now the norm. Yet this snippet of footage does something in excess of what we have come to expect from content that is uploaded and circulated on social media platforms. It is more than witnessing that takes place in and through media<sup>7</sup> or even citizen witnessing<sup>8</sup> that captures the affectedness of the witness: its mediation is vital, corporeal, and co-produced with the affectivity of the scene itself. If witnessing is about the forging of responsibility to an event,<sup>9</sup> then what binds witnesses to *this* moment is not the specificity of an element nor any semantic content that might be decoded but its untethered intensities, its politics roaring into view as visceral, material, emergent. The footage moves beyond mere representation or illustration and instead captures something of the forces and intensities that move in and through the scene captured in the frame. If the video itself serves as a kind of testimony, our belated witnessing is exceeded or overwhelmed by the immediacy with which it returns to the relational composition of the unruly, untameable event.

## The Affectability of Flesh

Gilles Deleuze called the experience of something acting "immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh" the "logic of sensation."<sup>10</sup> His object of study is a Francis Bacon painting, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, which captures its pontifical subject screaming in a state of anguish. For Deleuze, the scream is the result of invisible and insensible forces that bear down on the body and move in excess of the spectacular scene of suffering to which the scream might be causally linked. The power of Bacon's painting is that it captures the scream itself rather than the horror and violence that produce it, and in the encounter with the painting one feels something of the affective forces that conditioned this scream. The logic of sensation, then, moves us toward a pathic mode of perception that precedes discursive signification. A similar intensity animates the scene at North Fairfax and Beverly. We find ourselves attuned to the forces that quicken the collective body moving in riot and refusal before we have the opportunity to reflect on what we are watching and what it might mean. The footage constitutes what Deleuze called an "operative field," one in which affective forces and intensities come together in a single compositional plane to produce an aesthetic experience: witnessing.<sup>11</sup>

Such an attunement to the way racial capitalism produces structures and social relations that makes some lives more vulnerable to premature death than others can be thought through Hortense Spillers's conception of flesh.<sup>12</sup> Spillers argues that the violent processes of the Middle Passage stripped the enslaved of personhood and reduced them to undifferentiated flesh. Spillers focuses on the figure of the Black female slave, showing how racializing assemblages that emerge with the colonial world-making project are also processes of ungendering that seek to disrupt the kinship bond between mother and child, a disruption that is central to the transformation of enslaved subjects into commodity objects. This transformation from body to flesh strips the slave of the capacity to signify, according to Enlightenment markers of subjectivity. As such, flesh is rendered undifferentiated matter that can be dominated, disciplined, and subjugated. The violent disciplining of the flesh that comes with the transatlantic slave trade sets out to destroy communal bonds and separate the enslaved into individual bodies that can be objectified and accounted for. The distinction between body and flesh, writes Spillers, is "the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions."<sup>13</sup> She continues, "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography." The analytic of flesh makes material the abstractions of race, writing the conceptual fictions of racial hierarchy onto the flesh with whips and chains. "If we think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative," Spillers tells us, "then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard."<sup>14</sup> Crucially, for Spillers, the flesh carries a hieroglyphic imprint or memory that is passed down from one generation to another.

Flesh also precedes the body that belongs to a symbolic order bound to Western modernity—the body of Man. As such, flesh also comes before the racializing grammar such a body implies. The body that is made to signify Enlightenment subjectivity is imposed upon the flesh and this imposition draws our attention to the presence of the flesh itself. The paradox of flesh is that it cannot be erased (and so bears the trace of racial violence) at the same time that it precedes the body (and so offers an escape from violence of Western modernity). Flesh is matter that cannot be erased or stilled and, as such, can be understood as a relation of affectability. Flesh registers forces of sensation that precede the discursive, flesh is that which gives us the capacity to feel for and with others, flesh is inherently relational and social. It is not merely a zone of exclusion but a condition of possibility that foregrounds affective attunement in ways that might allow us to feel our way collectively toward an alternate conception of humanity. Building on Spillers' thought, Alexander Weheliye writes that "the particular assemblage of humanity under purview here is habeas viscus, which, in contrast to bare life, insists on the importance of miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life."<sup>15</sup>

## After Optimism

In the small slice of footage that we are focused on, we see these miniscule movements and glimmers of hope irrupt into the collective formation of a riot. We witness flesh

attuning to flesh, forming a collective body that moves against the logic of individuation and against the systematic devaluation of Black (social) life that is still the weather of the present. Yet this present cannot be understood as already formed and the social cannot be reduced to fixed forms that remain stable and static. Rather, the social must be understood as always emerging, and so demands modes of thinking capable of attending to that which is still in formation. "The present," writes Lauren Berlant, "is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back."<sup>16</sup> How, then, might we understand the structures of feeling of this moment? And what does this footage show us about the importance of thought as feeling and feeling as thought?

In this footage we feel the irruption of a politics of immanence and movement that sweeps individuals into a collective body that rises against the state. We feel the vibrational intensity of this expression of refusal, attune to the bodies as they shout, scream, smash windows, torch cop cars, and demand abolition. But this footage also shows us something about the way that a shared historical horizon can produce what Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling," those "changes of presence" that are "emergent or pre-emergent" and therefore "do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action."<sup>17</sup> Almost a decade ago, Berlant famously redeployed Williams's concept to describe our attachments to an idea of the "good life" that was becoming increasingly unattainable under neoliberal capitalism. She identified this structure as the relation of "cruel optimism": an "attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic."<sup>18</sup> Cruel optimism describes our continued affective investment in upward mobility, in the promise of stable jobs, nuclear families, the liberation that comes with owning property, and the political systems, institutions, and free markets that surround and support such norms, even as those very things were being continuously eroded by the neoliberal order. But what of those subjects whose lives were never structured by attachments of cruel optimism in the first place? And what if cruel optimism is giving way to as yet undefined structures of feeling as the certainties of late capitalism dissolve even more?

The shared historical horizon that leads to these thirty-nine seconds of footage can be traced back to the 1970s, which Joshua Clover describes as the beginning of the "Long Crisis."<sup>19</sup> The intensive process of deindustrialisation that begins in this period has produced a crisis for capital that has resulted in the production of what Karl Marx termed "relative surplus populations." Historically capital has resolved the crisis of overaccumulation by seeking out new locations where production has yet to reach a tipping point and can therefore be reinvested so accumulation can begin again. The Long Crisis is, in part, defined by the failure of capital to restabilize, which has had the effect of pushing more and more workers outside of, or adjacent to the wage relation. Rendered surplus to the capitalist cycle of economic reproduction, the state steps in and manages such populations through disciplinary measures such as policing and incarceration, but also through the diffuse and differently effective management of feelings that maintain attachments to the system against all odds. This short piece of footage hints at the emergent potential of a structure of feeling that is more collective and urgent than cruel

optimism: a brick through a window, a police station on fire, an abolitionist commons, a collective chant.

In the midst of the unravelling of the neoliberal dream and the dissolution of the viability of cruel optimism as the sustaining affective formation of its undelivered promises, and as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the world, the question remains open as to what structure of feeling might shape and be shaped by whatever replaces the failed project of neoliberalism. One response to the pandemic has been a push to return as quickly as possible to “normal life,” a phrase used to describe a pre-pandemic world structured by the rolling crises of capitalism in its post-industrial and increasingly circulatory phase. In the invocation of a return to “normality,” there is an attempt to flatten the riots of 2020 and subsume them within a liberal narrative in which the conviction of Derek Chauvin is pointed to as evidence of justice served. While it is too soon to say what the legacy of these riots will be, outbreaks of collective politics such as those captured in these thirty-nine seconds hold out the possibility of a prefigurative affective structure, a structure of feeling rooted in collective relations against the delimiting of life demanded by the state: a structure of feeling that dissolves oppressions instead of sustaining them. And yet because a moment of radical contestation is always open to intervention by the forces of reaction, the potential of this collectivity has its counterpoint in phalanxed police lines, in the armed militias of Proud Boys and the sprawling conspiracies of QAnon. Berlant again: “History is what has hurt and it continues to make shadow lines, and we are always in the haze of the present, sensing new repetitions-to-be, some of which can be willed, others of which remain enigmatic.”<sup>20</sup> As the present in which we find ourselves turns to tumult, as the weather—that “total climate” which Sharpe describes as “antiblack”—gathers storm clouds, the riot offers the possibility for the collective thinking-feeling-living of an otherwise. Such an otherwise begins not with a program of reform and institution building but with the irruption of wild affect that has as its animating relational force a collective surge towards liberation. A surge that pulls the witness down the road, past rolling refuse and fleeing police, towards the crowd as it hurtles towards an undefined future.

## Notes

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## Feelings, Fascism, and Futures

by Suzanne Enzerink | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope,  
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**ABSTRACT** The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed some of the most glaring inequalities within nations and across the globe. While the disruption caused by the pandemic has given rise to hopes for a cultural reset to address these structures of inequality—captured compellingly by Arundhati Roy in her vision of the pandemic as a portal—the sediments of inequality have proven hard to erode. In this contribution, I explore this regressive impulse by honing in on the affect of restraint. While restraint is not ordinarily characterized as such, in the pandemic it has been a defining feature of our lives. However, it was not afforded equally. I begin by showing how restraint has become racialized, serving as a political tool to suppress protests, notably Black Lives Matter. I then move to show how globally, too, there has been an imbalance in who is—and what countries are—expected to practice nonintervention, linking both domestic and international uses of restraint to these preexisting structures of inequality. I end by proffering a vision for how, despite all these obstacles, the pandemic has also offered ways to bypass the state and form new social formations.

**KEYWORDS** affect, fascism, race, mutual aid, pandemic, white supremacy

## Introduction

How can the pandemic be a portal, if the histories that foreclose radical possibilities and resist reorganization are so present?<sup>1</sup> In her essay “The End of White Innocence,” part of her acclaimed 2020 book, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Cathy Park Hong reads fantasies about perpetual childhood and innocence as a form of white privilege:

The legacy of Holden Caulfield’s arrested development has dominated the American culture industry, from the films of Steven Spielberg and Wes Anderson to the fiction of Jonathan Safran-Foer. In the mid-aughts, there was even a short-lived movement called New Sincerity, where artists and writers thought that it would be a radical idea to *feel*. ‘To feel’ entailed regressing to one’s own childhood, when there was no Internet and life was much purer and realer. Though they prized authenticity above all else, they stylized their work in a vaguely-repellent faux-naïf aesthetic that dismissed politics for shoe-gazing self-interest.<sup>2</sup>

The passage is worth quoting in full because it so perfectly encompasses both recursive obsessions with protecting innocence thought to be inherent in childhood and the undeniable white privilege inherent in such fantasies. Culture in the United States is at once driven by a desire to revert to a simpler past and the total erasure of the violence that



this past entailed for everyone who was not white. Trump's dog whistle to "Make America Great Again" is the most jarring embodiment of this new American fascism. In its logic, "he is just a boy" got Dylann Roof an order of Burger King, courtesy of the police, after massacring Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina<sup>3</sup> while Trayvon Martin was murdered by a police officer walking home from a convenience store, because Black boys can never be boys and are always men.<sup>4</sup> Whiteness, conversely, can afford to only invoke feeling flexibly, for aesthetic purposes like Wes Anderson or to track individual mitigating circumstances. Until Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah labeled him "A Most American Terrorist" in her Pulitzer Prize-winning essay,<sup>5</sup> Roof was described as mentally disturbed, an emanation of, as his elementary school principal worded it to Ghansah, "how vulnerable and precarious self-esteem is for white, working-class people in this society." Young Dylann, this narrative goes, was traumatized from a young age on by his lack of economic privilege, or the form of privilege expected to come with whiteness. He was made to *feel* his exclusion, certain writers suggested. Not, emphatically, a terrorist. Yet these affective excuses found no mirror in Roof himself, who showed no remorse or any form of emotion during his trial, even as his lawyers continuously invoked his allegedly corrupted innocence (his economic marginalization and the unconfirmed rape of a family member by Black men) and feelings of inadequacy.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, for racialized Americans who are always aware of being othered, even if nothing happens, feeling race is not a choice, a privilege, or a defense strategy. It is a given. As Sara Ahmed writes, "being emotional" has historically been constructed as a "characteristic of some bodies and not others," an equation often informed—at least in part—by race and its ties to a perceived national identity.<sup>7</sup> Race and affect, in other words, are mutually constituted, a realization that the field of affect studies has centered in recent years building on the work of scholars such as Ahmed and Jose Esteban Muñoz.<sup>8</sup> This has constant effects on the interior and exterior lives of people of color and those marginalized along parallel axes. As Hong writes, it is not the racist "incident itself but the stress of its anticipation" that leads to a state of forever suspension of a next injury, the titular minor feelings.<sup>9</sup> While *Minor Feelings* was completed before the pandemic accelerated, the rise of anti-Asian sentiment will only have intensified this forever anticipation. The roots of American fascism lie in this divergent understanding of who gets to feel, of who gets to be innocent, and who has to await. It is fascism and resistance against it that also mark how the COVID-19 pandemic played out in the US and abroad. As a scholar located in Beirut, what has stood out to me are the similarities in how the pandemic unraveled, despite vast differences in overall national context and financial standing. Access to capital, in both cases, formed the primary shield, an access itself determined by privilege along the lines of race, gender, nationality, and class. To make this point, I compare the US and Lebanese contexts as examples in this essay.

I open my contribution with this musing about racialized feeling for the generative segue it provides to the form of affect I will focus on for this forum on affect's radical possibilities: restraint. The past informs the present. While it may appear as though new affective formations have manifested during this last, unprecedented year, in fact they are subterranean formations and sentiments brought to the surface, for better and for worse. The same environment that created Dylann Roof, that is built on the protection of white

feeling and property, today seeks to foreclose any opportunity for the pandemic to be a portal, as Arundhati Roy phrased the potentialities of the moment.<sup>10</sup>

## Racialized Restraint and the Pandemic

Restraint is not customarily thought of as an affect, but rather the policing of it. Nevertheless, it is the nerve center of our feelings. Being forced or choosing to hide, or hold in emotions generates new intensities of them, while at the same time engendering a solidarity between all those who subscribe to the imperative to exercise it. Moving to recognize restraint as a central enactment of affect fits with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's call for scholars to move away from focusing disproportionately on negative emotions. Focusing on race and affect, he writes that "racial domination produces the entire emotional gamut, hate and love, disgust and pleasure, and aversion and empathy."<sup>11</sup> Restraint, I argue, is another category produced by and routed through racial domination. Before suggesting how radical pathways might emerge, I therefore look at how restraint has been wielded throughout the pandemic and its particular racial contours.

In the midst of the pandemic, restraint was demanded from all. We had to hold back the impulse to hold close those dear to us, stop ourselves from giving into a deep desire to finally hug our best friend again, to see our ill relative, meet our new grandchild. We had to stop ourselves from selfishly hoarding all the toilet paper and hand sanitizer from the shelves, and from imperiling essential service workers to satisfy late-night cravings or the desire to dine out. An alarming if not surprising amount of white people—with varying degrees of success—also had to "restrain" themselves from blaming Chinese/Americans or, in a homogenizing rhetoric, Asian/Americans at large for all of these things. On Twitter and other forms of social media, microaggressions and overt aggressions about the provenance of the virus began to circulate; advice rubrics such as Slate's Dear Prudence suddenly had to field questions < <https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/03/dear-prudence-coronavirus-straining-marriage.html> > about strained familial relations<sup>12</sup>; and reports of anti-Asian violence, including in allegedly liberal cities, skyrocketed. For a lot of white people, then, their knee-jerk response was to process the threat of the virus through the lens of preexisting stereotypes about subpar public health standards and eating habits in China. Trump's designation of "the China virus" was oil on a fire already aflame.

Yet restraint was also always racialized in another way. When in the middle of the pandemic, Americans of color and their white allies publicly advocated for their right to equality, those in power quickly figured it as an excess of emotion. Their demand for radical change was figured not as a rational demand but as a chaotic outburst that imperiled public health and safety. As then-President Trump claimed, "cases started to rise among young Americans shortly after demonstrations, which you know very well about, which presumably triggered a broader relaxation of mitigation efforts nationwide."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Black Lives Matter protesters were reprimanded for their *lack* of restraint. This has been a recurring motif within the status quo's interpretations of demands for racial equality, yet a demonstrably false one. In a 1993 interview, novelist Toni Morrison was asked to comment on the explosion of affect that came into view in the aftermath of

the Rodney King trial and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. Morrison, however, flipped the question. "What struck me is the restraint they showed. Not the spontaneity, the restraint. They waited for justice and it didn't come. They didn't do a thing. That's amazing."<sup>14</sup> Black Lives Matter and other radical calls for reform are not sudden, but the culmination of decades, centuries of justice denied. The fact that the pandemic has disproportionately affected racialized Americans lent even more urgency and reason for protests that addressed not just police brutality, but state brutality. Even former president Barack Obama seemed to misunderstand just how much restraint has characterized social movements in the United States. In December 2020, he dismissed the use of "snappy" slogans like "defund the police," arguing that these alienate the masses and impede robust social change. "Do you want to actually get something done, or do you want to feel good among people you already agree with?" he continued.<sup>15</sup> As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and others quickly retorted, "people did it his way" already: they went to meetings, liaised with precinct representatives, sought recourse through the system.<sup>16</sup> It did not work.

Instead, during the pandemic, people of color in the United States and those in socio-economically vulnerable positions across the globe, have been hit hardest by the virus. Those in power did not react. Initially, only Brazil committed to granting priority vaccination to Indigenous populations, even though this group and other racialized populations were disproportionately affected everywhere.<sup>17</sup> In recent months, other nations such as Canada < <https://www.fnha.ca/about/news-and-events/news/indigenous-people-are-a-high-priority-to-receive-covid-19-vaccinations> ><sup>18</sup> and Australia < <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/getting-vaccinated-for-covid-19/covid-19-vaccines-indigenous> ><sup>19</sup> finally followed suit. Black Lives Matter, too, then could not but draw attention to this unequal health outcome across race as another form of racial violence embedded in the state, only to have the topsy turvy logic of racism transform them from victims to culprits in the media. How different things looked for white Americans, who displayed a spectacular lack of communal care. White Americans, faces distorted with anger, mouths agape, banged on the windows as they peered into the Ohio State Capitol demanding business be reopened.<sup>20</sup> The scene drew comparisons to a frame from George Romero's zombie film *Dawn of the Dead*, where capitalist zombies demand 24/7 access to consumer goods.<sup>21</sup> They were not scolded for their lack of restraint. They were instead exercising quintessential American values, the right to free speech in order to demand individual liberties, per the political status quo and the media.

In Lebanon, too, the abstract need for restraint and the privilege of being able to afford it was fragmented along lines of class and nationality. Under the weight of a crippling financial crisis, many Lebanese businesses toppled when the first mandatory lockdown stopped even the already drastically reduced clientele from coming. Businesses therefore opposed a second lockdown in November—"it will throw thousands of workers on the street," the head of the general labor union said—and many simply did not comply.<sup>22</sup> Restraint, in this case, was too costly, and only those with homes in the mountains could afford to isolate and withdraw from public life. For the thousands of Palestinians and Syrians living in camps throughout the country, often in crowded and unsanitary conditions without access to running water or soap—the staples of all COVID-19 hygienic measures—this was never even a choice. In the aftermath of the devastating Beirut Port explosion on

August 4, 2020, all residents suddenly had no choice. In the absence of a state response, they had to pick up the rubble themselves, sweeping broken glass from the streets and tending to the wounded. It also shattered any sense of obligation to the state to comply with the call for restraint and restricted movement; residents erupted in anger at the corruption and neglect that had left 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in the heart of the city. If the state does not care for you, how can you respect it?

## Global Infrastructures of Care

How can the pandemic be a portal, with all these immovable sediments not just at home but abroad, too? Today's global political landscape is marked by new forms of imperialism, by thinly-veiled military interventions that exist to consolidate economic interests. Here, too, restraint is needed, a commitment to an absence of intervention unless absolutely imperative for public health or safety. Radical change can only come about globally, with acknowledgement of the devastation that the United States has wrought at home and abroad because it violated this principle of restraint. Joe Biden, in a "sweet" Thanksgiving message to Americans to acknowledge the hardships of the pandemic, fell short. After celebrating the restraint, resilience, and sacrifices made by Americans under COVID, Biden concluded that "the twenty-first century," as he forcefully said, "will be an American century."<sup>23</sup> Paired with his post-victory mantra of "America is back," what seems to be on the political horizon is not a break with or interrogation of US imperial interventions. It is a continuation of them, with all the devastating effects this entails for populations across the globe. For Palestinians, it is continued and increasingly aggressive Israeli settlement of their homelands. For the Lebanese, it might be a withholding of aid until the government includes only American-friendly parties, no matter whether these parties have themselves robbed the Lebanese commoners blind ever since the civil war. The state, in other words, will continue its cold calculus at home and abroad.

This is not to say that radical affective alliances are impossible. We have a long lineage before us of activists, writers, and thinkers who imagined futures built around a collectivity of feeling. As Audre Lorde noted, "our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge."<sup>24</sup> Restraint in the accumulation of resources has been a foundational tenet of social welfare. Restraint in extraction is the only way we might still save the ecological futures of our globe. Both the forced isolation of the pandemic and the necessarily communal nature of battling this virus have provided space to consider how we can make the communal good part of our everyday practice. The infrastructure built by the collective embrace of masking and staying home, seemingly small individual actions with nevertheless sizable collective effects, can become an infrastructure of equality and common care. What is crucial, as Lauren Berlant already noted in 1999, is that affective experience translates to concrete action. "What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation," she asked, "when feeling *good* becomes evidence of justice's triumph?"<sup>25</sup> Heartwarming stories of solidarity, neighborliness, and unexpected friendships, can provide momentary relief from the badgering of bad news that this pandemic has wrought, a sense of connection even, but such encounters in themselves

cannot form the basis of meaningful change. Radical affect, if you will, has to be made material.

Will the pandemic be a portal, when both the necessity of restraint and these historical obstacles make the path forward narrow? Dean Spade's new book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* offers a model here. Mutual aid, Spade urges, is a path to reimagine community and power that can form an alternative to the self-destructive course we have been on, which Spade typifies as "intensive, uneven suffering followed by species extinction."<sup>26</sup> Mutual aid, Spade notes, when broken down to its molecules is survival work, spearheaded by community members caring for their vulnerable neighbors. When this survival work is "in conjunction with social movements demanding transformative change," we get to a praxis.<sup>27</sup>

We see this in the United States in many local initiatives, where neighbors come together to fill the gaps left by a negligent state. In Long Beach, California, for example, community members founded a mutual aid network, LB United < <https://www.lbunited.com/> >, after several local food banks closed down. At current, they provide both information and targeted aid to a wide range of constituencies, from veterans to the elderly, all under the rubric of "solidarity not charity." Initiatives like this have popped up all over the country, both informally between neighbors and through grassroots networks replete with websites and collaborative planners.

In Lebanon, several of these initiatives have also manifested, first amidst deepening poverty caused by the currency collapse in 2019, and after that both during the pandemic and in the aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020. One of my students co-founded *ThisIsLeb* < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDrvRorhoZe/> >, a friend-run organization that solicits and distributes food and basic necessities to those affected by the explosion. *Khaddit Beirut* < <https://khadditbeirut.com/> >, a collaboration between academics, activists, experts, and community members, has taken it upon itself to draw up an entire roadmap for how Lebanese society might be salvaged from what at current seems never-ending corruption and decline. From healthcare to material reconstruction, Khaddit translates the desire for change into concrete material goals.

## Representing Restraint

In closing, another question has weighed on my mind, too, these days. How can we make visible the emotional toll that restraint has had? How do we quantify emotions that could not be shown, or that could not be shared in their customary way due to the isolation of the pandemic? From funerals to births, foundational life experiences took place in small circles. How can we give meaning to, index, begin to track the affective dimensions of this all? Ronak K. Kapadia's concept of *warm data*, a term he borrows from artist Mariam Ghani, helps us begin to imagine a possible route. While Kapadia introduces the concept in the context of the forever war, the *longue durée* of US war making in the global Asias, warm data's emphasis on using cold bureaucracies as the basis for insurgent creative work is especially germane to the COVID-19 pandemic. Warm data, Kapadia notes, forms a

"reparative feminist strategy that poetically limns the fissures, failures, and absences in already-forgotten US archives," in this case not of military bureaucracy, but public health infrastructure.<sup>28</sup> It is a way to recenter the perspectives of those most directly affected, those recorded by drones or now CT scans, who end up as just a disembodied entry in massive archives. We have the lists of names of the hundreds of thousands perished. Every day, new numbers track the latest infections—age, race/ethnicity, sex, location. What drew me to this forum on affect is the possibility to give body to these abstract indexes, to reinscribe and recenter lived experience into this narrative.

The most compelling efforts to do these have been necessarily very intimate, an antidote to the cold calculus of government data. In the United States, the Twitter account FacesOfCovid < <https://twitter.com/FacesOfCOVID> > performs this work. "They were more than a statistic," the account statement reads. Every day, the account posts dozens of obituaries, anecdotes, memorials, of those who died, often submitted directly by their family members. Art, too, can fill this gap. Lebanese Canadian artist Carol Mansour's conceptual art is another way to humanize, give warmth to these statistics. Mansour's "Covid-eo diary < [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_nHnsa977eM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nHnsa977eM) > " takes us through the artist's life in a Beirut closed down amidst the pandemic. On the street, she encounters a group of women, playing a game of socially-distanced charades. The category: "dreams that won't be fulfilled because of corona." The answers include "flying" and "getting a PhD." While the women laugh, the quiet heartbreak dominates.



كوفيديو - A COVID-eo Diary  
Daraj Media Follow

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Carol Mansour's *COVID-eo Diary* (2020) shows a group of Beiruti sitting outside, socially distanced, playing a game of charades. Courtesy of Daraj Media.

This motif continues in Mansour's increasingly desperate need for human contact as she continues to obey the continuously-extending lockdown. She goes to a cafe to pick up a bottle of wine in a makeshift drive-through, and muses about how she dreads wearing a bra again. Most of all, the project chronicles Mansour's hopes and fears as she is navigating a city pushed further to the precipice by the virus. In Lebanon, even full restraint will not solve the crises that predate COVID-19. In locales where government support is absent at the worst or fragmentary at best, even the most committed radical collectivities might not suffice. Nevertheless, Mansour's greatest fear is one echoed across the globe: that we will have learnt nothing, and that things will go back to normal.


## Conclusion











Only the type of radical affectivities shared in this forum offer a glimmer of hope, and the only way to fulfill their promise is to persevere even amidst bleak historical precedents and government normalization. The famous 4 Non Blondes song that Mansour incorporates in full perhaps captures best the collective and necessarily quotidian nature of such change: "I pray/ Oh my God do I pray/ I pray every single day/ for revolution."









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## Within and Against Racial Segregation: Notes from Italy's Encampment Archipelago

by Irene Peano | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** The pandemic brought migrant farm workers into the limelight once again, as has happened repeatedly in the last three decades, in Italy as in many other parts of the world. Here I examine how intersecting and sometimes conflicting discourses and interventions, that have this biopolitically conceived population as their object, decide upon these subjects' worthiness of attention, care, and sympathy through criminalizing, victimizing, and humanitarian registers. I reflect on some of the affective dynamics that sustain both the governmental operations through which these populations were (sought to be) managed and reactions against them from a situated perspective, as an accomplice to many of the forms of struggle in which migrant farm workers have engaged in the last decade in Italy. The stage for many such occurrences is what I have elsewhere defined as the "encampment archipelago" that many such workers, and particularly those who migrate from across West Africa, inhabit—labor or asylum-seeker camps, but also slums or isolated, derelict buildings, and various hybrid, in-between spaces among which people circulate.

**KEYWORDS** resistance, farm workers, migrant labor, racialization, COVID-19, Italy

In the spring of 2020, the pandemic brought migrant farm workers into the limelight once again, as has happened recursively in the last three decades, in Italy as in many other parts of the world. Branded as "essential," they were the object of intersecting and sometimes conflicting discourses and interventions which ranged from the criminalizing to the victimizing and the humanitarian.<sup>1</sup> Yet, abandonment always lurked as the possible outcome of a governmental process intent on sorting bodies and their worthiness of attention, care, and sympathy. Here, I wish to reflect on some of the affective dynamics that sustained both the governmental operations through which these biopolitically conceived "populations" were (sought to be) managed and reactions against them. I do so from a situated perspective, as an accomplice to many of the forms of struggle that migrant farm workers have promoted in the last decade in Italy. The stage for many of these occurrences is what elsewhere I defined as the "encampment archipelago"<sup>2</sup> that many such workers, and particularly those who migrate from across West Africa, inhabit—labor or asylum-seeker camps, but also slums or isolated, derelict buildings, and various hybrid, in-between spaces among which people circulate.

## Segregating Anxieties and Humanitarian Racisms

On the one hand, the “assemblages” (*assemblamenti*<sup>3</sup>) of migrants in some city neighborhoods during the first lockdown period wreaked havoc among residents, who—often instigated by neofascist politicians perennially in search of an opportunity to gain visibility—perceived these “foreign bodies” as a health hazard. This is the case, for example, with Foggia, the capital of the second most extensive agricultural district in Italy, located in the northern part of the southeastern Apulia region. In the neighborhood adjacent to the city’s train station, a series of dedicated stores selling *hala* meat and specialty food from West Africa, Eastern Europe, and South Asia, as well as money-transfer, communication services and betting agencies, have flourished in the last decades. This is a reference point for migrant farm and care/sex workers who live scattered in slums, labor camps, derelict farmhouses, and other abandoned buildings outside or in the outskirts of the city. Through the years, the presence of “loitering” migrants has repeatedly attracted the hostility of a portion of the citizenry, fuelled by far-right groups, and often expressed in the biopolitical language of contamination. Periodic police and vigilante raids are one of the most pernicious effects of these anxieties and their manipulation. Likewise, the sharing of public transport from the hamlet of Borgo Mezzanone (where one of the largest slums is located) towards the city of Foggia reproduced long-brewing animosities across racial(ized) lines, exacerbated by the suddenly materialized threat of an actual viral infection.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the living conditions of many migrants, who are confined to isolated and insanitary dwellings, made for alarms among civil-society organizations who feared an outburst of contagion in those spaces. Thus, many NGOs were prompted to organize campaigns that brought sanitizing equipment and face covers, as well as food and instructions on how to wash one’s hands, to the poor and outcast par excellence. In the month of April 2020, some of the West African dwellers of the high-security labor camp at San Ferdinando (located in the district of Reggio Calabria) reacted angrily at the spectacularized display of charity attempted by Catholic third-sector giant, Caritas. Volunteers and camera people were drawn out, and some commotion ensued in the camp management’s office.<sup>5</sup>

As an informal, militant group that has supported the self-organization of migrants living in such spaces for years, my comrades and I experienced a sense of impotence derived first from forced immobilization and the concomitant threat of repression (and contagion). But such feelings also combined with a mounting frustration vis-à-vis the intensifying of long-rehearsed criminalizing/victimizing/paternalistic discourses, the Janus-faced operations of othering with which we are so familiar. Those go hand-in-hand with the spectacularization of migrant farm workers (our racially-marked comrades, friends, brothers, and sisters), and their living spaces—where, meanwhile, life seemed to go on as usual. After all, neither life in emergency, nor racist quarantining or infantilization were news of any sort, and work in the farms was no less harsh, underpaid, and casualized for being suddenly cast as essential. As a matter of fact, threats to health and life itself in such spaces of containment result much more from the existential precarity structured by racism than from the global pandemic. It was rather as if, for once, the white European majority was being given a taster of what life in emergency mode feels like.

Contagion anxieties projected upon such an abject "population," however, proved unfounded until well into the summer months. Thus, some of the most putatively authoritative news outlets in the Italian media wondered, in the aftermath of spurious declarations by eminent virologists, whether "African" (thus implicitly Black) migrants might be immune from the disease given the extremely low rate of detected cases among this group.<sup>6</sup> The "durability"<sup>7</sup> of discourses on racial immunity summoned the recursive, stratified temporalities of racist violence and their cavalier effects, justifying abandonment and unequal distributions of empathy, care, and sensitivity. Months later, against all evidence and supposedly defending "African migrants" as "our" future (in utilitarian terms, as workers and taxpayers), against those singling them out as disease carriers, a member of the lower chamber of Parliament reiterated the point. (African) migrants "are stronger than us," "none of them is hospitalized with COVID-19, they do not get infected. It is a matter of genetics." In a speech that seemed to conjure localized iterations of nineteenth-century racist science, he continued, "I, who am from Calabria, I am stronger. I had COVID-19 but it lasted only for a day. Calabrian people are stronger because genetically more resistant, we are white Africans."<sup>8</sup> Others among those interviewed by the same radio show agreed: "they [Africans] embark upon 'voyages of hope' [*viaggi della speranza*, as migrants' Mediterranean crossings are known in public discourse], they *are* stronger." The broadcast followed up from a skirmish between the "liberal" parliament member and a neofascist counterpart, in which, besides Africans, "Romas" were also scapegoated as disease spreaders. The entire repertoire of racist and anti-migrant arguments which has characterized Italian public debate in the last decades, and which summons deeper genealogies, was rehearsed once again.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of migrant farm workers, among whom the West African component is rather large<sup>10</sup>, living conditions structurally akin to quarantine, together with slum/camp dwellers' age-old experience in observing strict hygiene rules in dire conditions,<sup>11</sup> might help understand how the pandemic was initially staved off. Indeed, the different "camp forms"<sup>12</sup> to which their inhabitants are confined can be seen to respond to the three interrelated logics which Marc Bernardot<sup>13</sup> identified as subtending to such apparatuses of capture: the fear of invasion, of subversion, and of contamination. Here, the protection of external borders and of internal cohesion is associated with the preservation of the healthy body of the nation. Historically, spaces of quarantine were juxtaposed with, and helped bring forth, the modern structures of sovereignty and migration management. If epidemics played a foundational role in the construction of modern states, since at least the nineteenth century the quarantining of migrants (at departure and/or destination) formed a core procedure in the selection of able and "safe" bodies to put to work, and of others to abandon to their fate as excess populations. From a health-risk management tool, the camp became a wide-ranging prevention device, imposing a generalized quarantine for the sorting of individuals. The biopolitics of population government thus found in the camp one of its central architectural and juridical props. In the words of Bernardot:

Foreigners' camps are inscribed on the one hand in the tradition of the lazaretto and of leprosy, and on the other in that of maritime quarantine. They are their modern form, to the extent that they partake of their preventive function in health matters, but extend it in repressive fashion . . . to other types of risk, notably demographic and political. This goal is most often articulated to others, for the management of crises and migrations. Camps

thus function as a decontamination or confinement chamber in exceptional circumstances, whilst health posts (which have replaced quarantines and lazarettos) are integrated into the healthcare and border protection systems.<sup>14</sup>

In the contexts I am concerned with, spatial devices compound with juridical and symbolic-affective *dispositifs* to contain foreign bodies: socio-physical separation is not engineered only through formalized camp structures. Formal and informal spaces of segregation, and their legal underpinnings, are also produced through discriminatory migration policies that create differential access to citizenship rights along a continuum (up until total banishment), reinforced by racist prejudice. Even those documented West African migrants who might afford it face difficulties renting houses in city and town centers, and often prefer to live in slums where they can rely on their community for the kind of support and conviviality that hardly comes from those who do not identify with them (many Italians but also migrants from other parts of the world). Slums are, furthermore, spaces where organization and resistance (as much as exploitation and a range of forms of negative reciprocity) can take shape. For this reason, they are feared by institutional apparatuses which periodically proceed to their dismantlement, “sanitization,” and/or regimentation into formalized camps with their attendant rules and restrictions. Yet, a perfectly reined in labour camp is really only a fantasy of power: architectures, infrastructures, and limitations to dwellers’ freedom are ordinarily tampered with, and protest as well as trespassing are a constant potential in such spaces.

## Refusals and Reversals of Containment

Indeed, the whole carceral archipelago—of which labor camps are a part—has been intermittently on fire since the spring of 2020. Prisons became the stage of some of the earliest, most significant, dramatic, and even, sadly, tragic protests against the restrictive measures ostensibly implemented to contain the spread of the virus inside detention facilities, and against the actual disregard for inmates’ health which such provisions concealed. Inmates of migrant detention centres, as well as asylum seekers housed in reception facilities and in quarantine ships reserved for incoming migrants, were also among the first to rise up, later followed by migrant farm laborers, whether homeless and precariously housed or contained in camps and slums.

Whilst segregation-as-usual and immobility characterized the first phase of the pandemic, as the summer harvests approached the requirements of agroindustrial production, and the vulnerability of the workers on which it relies to guarantee profits, pushed many seasonal laborers to move between enclaves across the country, as in previous years. In the northwestern district of Saluzzo (part of the province of Cuneo, Piedmont), where the multimillion fruit industry employs thousands of (mostly migrant) casual workers, institutions at all levels erected barriers against the provision of safe accommodation for those workers (once again, mainly West African) who were already in the country, much to the concern of farmers who were already alarmed by the lack of laborers due to mobility restrictions. Publicly managed labor camps in many cases did not open, ostensibly for fear of contagion. Pushed to seek work after many months of near standstill, migrant workers



faced fines and charges for having violated restrictions, and were prevented even from erecting the informal tent camp (tellingly nicknamed “Guantanamo”) they had relied on in previous years. Army effectives were deployed to such an end. Incoming job seekers were thus forced to sleep in public parks, on curbs and in abandoned buildings, being careful not to be spotted in groups of more than three, lest they be fined and even expelled from the district by administrative fiat. The luckier ones found accommodation within farms—far from an ideal arrangement, given the isolation, the typically poor conditions of lodging, and the chances it affords employers for increased control and the intensification of working rhythms.

It was in such a scenario that one of the first protests was staged, in June 2020 (see figure 1). Defying police and government restrictions on their right to demonstrate (yet another ostensible measure of health protection), homeless casual workers displayed a staggering determination. First, they flouted institutional and farmers’ representatives, who, summoned to an urgency meeting, had responded to workers’ demands with a well-rehearsed repertoire of indifference, vagueness, and even open hostility. Protesters then reassembled into a parade that crossed the wealthy and mostly ill-disposed town of Saluzzo, repeatedly bringing traffic to a halt. And finally they (we) reached the site where, in previous years, a hostel had been made available to seasonal workers. Here, some proceeded to climb the tall concrete, barbed wire-topped wall surrounding the edifice, hands clasping the skin-tearing metal, under the vigilant eye of police cameras. Others caught hold of a stone and sought to smash the iron door open, to no avail. A police charge followed.<sup>15</sup> Those of us, accomplices and solidary, who were present could not but admire the power of this collective statement of existence and resistance, and be dismayed by the callousness of the institutional response. Days later civil-society organizations issued statements demanding a solution to the housing issue faced by farm laborers, without ever acknowledging the migrants’ protest—a reiteration of epistemic violence that is no news but always a blow. And yet, despite the total lack of overt recognition, the protest led to the opening of several facilities for migrant farm workers. Police checks, deportations, expulsion orders, and the more general criminalization of some of those who participated in the protest accompanied this process, although police measures were partially overturned by courts. The living arrangements provided by local and state authorities often consisted of container boxes and small tents. As usual, it was a very partial and hard-won result.

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Figure 1. A banner carried by protesters during the farm workers' demonstration in Saluzzo, district of Cuneo, June 12, 2020. Picture taken in front of the Town Hall. Used with permission from Enough is

Together with the protest in San Ferdinando mentioned earlier, this event inaugurated a period of tensions which would last until the end of the harvest season in November, during which migrants contested their surplus of segregation, implemented on “preventive” grounds but inflected with racialized differentiation. A few days after the protest in Saluzzo, in the town of Mondragone (on the Domitian littoral, north of Naples), another moment of much spectacularized, protracted protest broke out, this time involving Bulgarian farm workers, in overt conflict with some hostile locals and national-level politicians.<sup>16</sup> Episodes of open confrontation later took place in Saluzzo, Palazzo San Gervasio (district of Potenza, Basilicata region, see Figure 2), Foggia, and San Ferdinando.<sup>17</sup> These events entailed the refusal of hospitalization or isolation for “asymptomatic virus carriers” or the rejection of medical staff and health personnel performing tests and sharing information on the pandemic in the slums. Protests also broke out against the cordoning off of whole camps once COVID cases were detected, and against the delay in the opening of other camps because authorities had not adapted the facilities in compliance with preventive measures. Across the spectrum, an underlying exceptionalism was being contested, which assigned migrants to a different biopolitical category, unworthy of the forms of care, information, and attention devoted to citizens. Those diagnosed with the virus were kept in isolation together with healthy and COVID-negative people; communication was scanty and inaccurate; “COVID hotels” for asymptomatic patients were barred to (racialized) non-citizens, who could count at best on dedicated container boxes, that predictably were not appreciated as solutions. In this scenario, people who felt healthy and strong demanded to be allowed to work to support themselves and their relatives, affines, and others to whom obligations and affection are felt back in their countries of origin and beyond. And indeed, law enforcement agents often turned a blind eye to migrants eluding quarantine to go work in the farms. The contradictions between the racialized systems of biopolitical containment and those of labor extraction surfaced in all their sharpness, but were ultimately resolved in forms of carelessness and abandonment. To date, no reliable and generalized provisions have been made to allow those not in possession of a national health insurance code (who may be otherwise documented or not, given the bureaucratic maze in which migrants are stuck by virtue of immigration policies) to get vaccinated and obtain the “green pass” that is now compulsory for long-distance travel and work.





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Figure 2. A moment of the protest carried out by migrant farm workers in Palazzo San Gervasio, district of Potenza, August 2020. The banners read "We want to live and work decently"; "Housing for all, ghettos for no one." Used with permission from [Comitato Lavoratori delle Campagne](https://www.facebook.com/comitatolavoratoridellecampagne/?__tn__=-UC*F) < [https://www.facebook.com/comitatolavoratoridellecampagne/?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-UC\\*F](https://www.facebook.com/comitatolavoratoridellecampagne/?__tn__=-UC*F)> .

Among African migrants stuck in the encampment archipelago, belief in racial immunity is widespread and concerns and conspiracy theories about the inflating of positive diagnoses for the purpose of profit on the part of health authorities, or about medical staff being responsible for the spread of the virus in the slums and camps abound. As a result, some migrants broke away from quarantine, while others refused to be tested or to reveal their contacts for the purposes of tracing. Whilst these inclinations might resonate with reactionary forms of denialism, the position from which they were aired grants for further consideration. As scholars, we have learned to understand conspiracy theories and rumor as political commentaries, which have often manifested among racialized and oppressed groups<sup>18</sup> and in connection with the biopolitical management and prevention of disease.<sup>19</sup> As militant accomplices, in the past year and a half many of us have faced the challenge of how to relate to such affectively laden manifestations of dissent beyond their truth value and to dispel the frustrations inherent in any such exercise of communication across epistemological barriers. Whilst not a definitive answer, witnessing, solidarity, complicity, and co-presence are the first, essential ingredients.


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## Notes

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5. For a radio interview of one of the residents of the camp after the protest, see <https://www.ondarossa.info/newstrasmissioni/2020/04/continuano-proteste-nella-tendopolisan?fbclid=IwAR03D8IBk804Zkm9zU0NIj56bdYeu4bh-cTroaymxUw6vUS5CotKI1JEQEg> < <https://www.ondarossa.info/newstrasmissioni/2020/04/continuano-proteste-nella-tendopolisan?fbclid=IwAR03D8IBk804Zkm9zU0NIj56bdYeu4bh-cTroaymxUw6vUS5CotKI1JEQEg>> . 
6. See for example G. Remuzzi, "Coronavirus, perché sono pochi i pazienti africani nelle terapie intensive? Dall'ipotesi della giovane età a quella della genetica. Gli studi sul ruolo del vaccino contro la tubercolosi. Ma nel Sud degli Stati Uniti la situazione è ribaltata," *Corriere della Sera*, April 16, 2020; F. Bernasconi, "Il virologo Galli: 'Immigrati africani immuni? È solo un'ipotesi' Il direttore di Malattie infettive al Sacco: 'Qui non abbiamo persone di origine africana ricoverate. La "porta di ingresso" del virus potrebbe essere diversa a seconda delle etnie,'" *Il Giornale*, March 24, 2020; R. Luna, "Migranti africani poco colpiti? Improbabile ma non ci sono dati," *La Repubblica*, March 27, 2020. For a debunking of such racialisms, see for example O. Obasuyi, "Pseudoscienza: i neri sono immuni al Coronavirus," March 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/@oqueens95/i-neri-sono-immuni-al-coronavirus-6c33592089a5> < <https://medium.com/@oqueens95/i-neri-sono-immuni-al-coronavirus-6c33592089a5>> . 
7. Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 
8. Gianfranco Librandi, broadcast on the radio show *La Zanzara* on December 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAlbliiSkmM> < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAlbliiSkmM>> . 

9. In the words of AbdouMaliq Simone: "the compounding humiliations and subjectifications of the black body are always linked to an inflation of its powers, which unless domesticated and disciplined, have no other trajectory than excess. Thus the management of the body is often less for its potential contamination, unruliness, or waywardness than for this tending to an excess without limits, exceeding the ability of any apparatus to frame it, and thus such a trajectory needs to be interrupted, interdicted. At the same time, it also is the basis for a presumption that such bodies can be left alone, left to fend for themselves—but with the constant proviso that interdictions and containment need to be pre-emptively applied" (pers. comm.). [↗](#)
10. In the order of several tens of thousands, and perhaps hundreds of thousands across the country, and of several thousands in the district of Foggia alone. Providing reliable estimates for this sector of the workforce is particularly arduous, given high rates of undocumentedness in relation both to immigration status and to labor arrangements. For the latest official figures of migrant farm workers, with a (partial) breakdown according to nationality, see Romano Magrini, "I lavoratori stranieri nel settore agricolo," in *Dossier statistico immigrazione 2020*, edited by Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS (Rome: Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS/Immigrazione Dossier Statistico, 2020). It must also be noted that following the outburst of the pandemic, many workers from Eastern Europe, the Balkan region and Northern Africa could not (and did not want to) return to Italy after the winter break, leaving West Africans and South Asians as the largest pool of available labor. See Peano, "Missing Farm Workers." [↗](#)
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15. For a more detailed account of the occurrences, see <https://www.facebook.com/bracciantinlottaSaluzzo> < <https://www.facebook.com/bracciantinlottaSaluzzo> > . [↗](#)
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## Bewilderment, Hope, and Despair

by Lasse Mouritzen, Madeleine Kate McGowan and Kristine Samson

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**ABSTRACT** This essay is a collective investigation of affective experience, bewilderment, and imagery during the COVID-19 situation in Copenhagen, Denmark through multivocal writing and filmmaking. By letting go of the promises of normality, both in thinking and creating, the writers explore various personal, academic, and aesthetic states of affect—hope, despair, desire, and frustration, like temporary landscapes or glimpses of a new world. Feeding on boredom and fear of being isolated, left inactive and frustrated, naive, or hopeful, this essay points into a different and shivering set of changes, personal and societal, that we are currently facing, and illustrates how such changes, full of pain or despair, might also open new becomings of desire and hope.

**KEYWORDS** affect, pandemic, bewilderment, despair, hope, collective, artistic research



### Bewilderment, Hope, and Despair

from Lasse Mouritzen

04:03 |



The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world into a state of despair. Not since the Second World War have so many people experienced trauma simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> We are in a double situation—on the one hand, in despair, seeking empathy for our struggles, and on

the other hand, guided by desires to overcome or confront the conforming refrains and restrictions of isolation. Affective states seem to govern both sides of the situation. As isolation breeds dreaming, restlessness, loneliness, haziness, or meditation, our surroundings become generative, morphing, leaking, transforming. The pre-pandemic places of attention now seem abandoned and quiet, but they also become places of bewilderment, generating a new sense of hope and despair.

As Donna Haraway writes, "It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."<sup>2</sup> This essay attempts to grasp and explore how inner stories and imagery transition into new worlds of lived spaces. The essay takes a departure from exercises in *monstrous* collective writing and video-making, in which we have explored our experience of the pandemic through speculative fabulations and imaginaries. In *monstrous*, we mean a hybrid of voices, a collective exercise as an odyssey of loose goals, ideas, fears, and wonders of the pandemic. Our collective and poetic writing has been sprinkled throughout the essay in sequences while the mosaic film work is made of the frayed edges and affective states of everyday scenarios, connecting the affects of the pandemic with the aesthetics of discontinuity and disembodiment.

As we engage in this essay—in writing, observing, and picturing subjects—our reflections unfold from a northwestern European perspective, being citizens of Denmark and Ireland, all of us rooted in the privileges of a welfare state. When reflecting on the city and life during the pandemic, we have our dominant experience set in an urban northwestern European context. We are aware that our experiences, elaborated in this essay, are personal explorations in the context of pandemics throughout history, and that they come from an overall privileged European position. We do not attempt to capture or search for a shared reality or experience, or aim to represent or reinsert specific perspectives, positions, or beliefs. Rather, this essay is a search in co-creation as an affective and aesthetic discipline to engage, process, and rearrange experienced moments of hope, despair, and bewilderment relating to the pandemic. We do not want to break free, disrupt, chase, or stay with these moments, but tremble with them. We situate them loosely within our theoretical backgrounds of visual culture, performance studies, affect studies, and urban studies. We have collaborated on arts-based practices for several years, developing artistic methods on approaching issues such as migration, borders, identity, and the climate crisis.

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< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/picture-1-Lasse-Mouritzen.jpg> >

Figure 1. "Wall Glitch" by Madeleine Kate McGowan, 2020.

## Pandemic Bewilderment

Still falling. Today. Still falling. From the repetitive orders and norms, repeating again and again. Still falling. Falling from the hard edges of what we have accomplished.

Spilling words, images, speculations all over the place. Words and gazes leaking from our living rooms. Your voice trembles for a moment. Words and images leaking from the concrete desserts of the city, from the rooftops of our discontent. On the floor life, trying to close my eyes of stones, my dream faces these weird friends from other cities. Doves coming from my chest, rumours!

We are being reworked, rewilded, and destabilized by an invisible submicroscopic infectious agent. As living bodies during a global pandemic, our experiences, daily lives, and the choreographies we perform are dramatically unstable. As Bayo Akomolafe writes, "Every virus in its unfolding mattering and mutability is the creation of new worlds; every jot and tittle come with their own universes. Viruses in themselves resist coherence and categorization; there isn't a stable group we can refer to."<sup>3</sup> Such agents are tilting bodies. We are interested in the body's various affective states and what a body can do in the time of the pandemic. Following Spinoza, we understand affect as the mutual and relational capacity of a body to affect and to be affected.<sup>4</sup> Since COVID-19 spread, we have become aware that being affected has increasingly become an everyday experience: being affected by figures, social distancing, death, discrimination, and vitalist bodies; affected by

our despair and desire, our new pathways and bewilderment, what Spinoza calls sad affects, affects which decrease the body's capacity to act. However, sad and intensive affects also produce imagery, worlds, and words, potentially carrying repressed thoughts to the forefront.

The pandemic is bewildering, not only to our everyday life but also to our capacity and manner of imagining. Our bodies have been settled and restrained, and we are brought into inhabiting new daily routines, patterns of encountering, greeting, feeling, and (dis)connecting. The pandemic state has disciplined us and opened new priorities, capacities, choreographies, and limits. In other ways, it has left us in extreme disorientation and within a new wild disorder of our lives. The pandemic body is like a wild body, conflicted between new modes of inner and outer fantasies, orders and social control. Following Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o, to be wild "is to be beside oneself, to be internally incoherent, to be driven by forces seen and unseen, to hear in voices, and to speak in tongues"<sup>5</sup> Such wild bodies conflict with the modern western narratives, stories, and everyday landscapes. Hence, the bewildered body experiences glitches in the former well-known urban landscape; it sees birds emerging in disembodied patterns, it imagines dark creatures entering into the twilight zone of what we have accomplished. It is as if we, in our bewilderment, distance ourselves from the categories within "human." We observe how our surrounding landscapes are touched with an untamed and yet unseen vibrancy. Is something else emerging? Our life before the pandemic is now an echo or an aftershock, an internal image with frayed edges. We can listen to the news and the promises of returning to normal, but we cannot stay with such an image. Furthermore, what "normal" is the news referring to anyway and for whom?

We know that we need to rethink the pandemic and its potentials, rather than rethinking the normal, to break through it.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, noted by Audrey Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>7</sup> Hence, we need to develop other tools and collective ways of shaping and living out our desires and inhabiting our despair outside the logics and constraints of the normal. Live in the ruins of former worlds, previous times, visions, and dreams of the pre-pandemic, which we now have to dismantle, to enter our current conditions.

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<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/picture-2-also-cover-picture-Lasse-Mouritzen.jpg>

Figure 2. "Doves" by Lasse Mouritzen, 2020.

## The Pandemic City

Still falling. Falling into broken flowers. No good internet connection and it is Corona time. Instead I'm attaching myself to the city of ruins.

The city, already a ruin.

The city, already a ruin. A wonder.

The city, already a ruin. A wonder. Drift away on my take-away.

Buildings leaking into the sky like lazy watercolors in slow motion.

Bring it home. Pandemic encounters on my kitchen floor. Hard concrete and dirty dishes.

During the pandemic crisis, the city and its social choreographies of distance and closeness are changing radically. The pre-pandemic city was, among other things, an interface for social encounters, gatherings, and physical presence. The city was host to festivals, concerts, sports events, demonstrations, markets, shopping malls, etc. Desires and hopes were released and explored in whichever form (commercial, sexual, radical,

caring, restless). However, the pandemic city is a ruin of these sociocultural matters, and we have become forced to face each other in new ways and through new mediums and activities. Through the loss of public practice, we have been disoriented in how we face each other, how we face ourselves and how we become through mutual public appearance, gestures, and potentials.

These new orientations have made us encounter our disembodied selves and the hegemonies of society on a structural level. We encounter despair because we do not know how to move, how to relate, how to approach one another. It is as if drifting becomes the preferred mode of being in the city. Moreover, how can we understand the city without understanding how we bring our solitude and despair into the public? The city is an external social interface for our lives and relates to our inner mental landscapes, which we bring into the public. Architect Aldo Rossi once stated that the city is the locus of collective memory. We must add that while the public might be a shared space, it is not shared equally, as our cities are predominantly built and governed on the historical basis and ideals of patriarchal structures and mythologies of whiteness. Hence, the city is a shared space, yet it is shared unequally and a catalyst for growing social, cultural, and economic injustice and struggle, new global movements fighting colonial hierarchies, racism, sexism, and patriarchy—not to mention the city as a generator of climate change, overconsumption, and natural catastrophes, where effects are unequally distributed. So what we might experience as glittering shopping malls merely hide another layer of a consumer production of endless short pleasures, overconsumption, pollution, and massive waste production, and thus ruination and a world falling apart. As Bruno Latour states, we are all refugees now, as the foundation for life is slipping away from us.<sup>8</sup> Cities are broken, and sharing affective states in public means sharing experiences of what is already broken.

While the home breeds and feeds subordinate desires, the city is the scene in which desires are momentarily shared from a distance. Our affective states, whether of despair or desire, are like viruses that spread. Viruses are leaking into the public. Like a virus shared and distributed through gazes, distances, proximities, movements, and expectations. The pandemic home, on the contrary, has become a multi-functional space, a workplace, a fighting ground, a breeding place for our desires, hopes, meditations, and fears. The home has, in many ways, replaced the public space with its multiple functions. It has also become the place for interface dialogues. Strange conversations often dominated by glitches and repetitively failed exchanges that keep returning as refrains of our devastation—"Can anybody hear me? Can you see me?" People try to pay attention, to be present, but the interface inserts time lapses, further distances, awkwardness, and disembodiment. We cannot overcome despair through such interfaces constructed from capitalist technologies. The refrains of social distance—"Can you hear me? Can you see me? Is anybody able to face my despair?"—do not only stick to the cruel fact of the inhuman technologies at hand but are also situations in which our despair leaks into more "junk-spaces"<sup>9</sup>—Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout, Teams, Messenger—that we cling to and nourish while simultaneously detesting them as they lack sensibility and touch. The intriguing promise of the interface is one of immediacy and closeness. However, what we get in return are uncanny unfoldings, and what we face is the distorted and haunting image of technoscientific ruination.



Let us return to the city. Halberstam and Nyong'o write, "We live in wild times; we bear witness to wild and ruinous places"<sup>10</sup> Is it so that the city has become a ruin, not because of social distancing, but because we still expect it to be the shared space for our dreams? Do we dare to think the city and urban communities away from the current ruinous state and into other ways of being together? Furthermore, how do we inhabit this uncertainty together? While we long to be able to travel, meet people, attend events, it could be possible to inhabit the urban ruin as an opportunity to break the bonds of capitalist notions of desire. Perhaps as Rebecca Solnit proposes, it has the capacity to experience desire as a sensation worthy in and of itself, without releasing it through the conquering of the object desired: "We treat desire as a problem to be solved, address what desire is for and focus on that something and how to acquire it rather than on the nature and the sensation of desire."<sup>11</sup> Could the city become a place for desiring otherwise?

## Hope and Desire

Subaltern algorithms in my body – shining, shining brighter.

Subaltern algorithms on my screen – they want you to buy and fuck.

Showered in the blue light of an empty chat-room

Bent out of shape from society pliers and love songs.

Forced ejaculation by the smiley on your screen.

We are guided by desires seeking to overcome or confront the conforming refrains and restrictions of isolation while at the same time speculating through new visual sensibilities and affects of everyday routines and spaces. In the pandemic state, spaces and places morph, leak, transform. They open up to other worlds and become places of desire and despair. The same can be said about our desires that leak and spillover in unbearable and contradictory situations. According to Lauren Gail Berlant, desire can easily sustain a "circuit of optimism and disappointment."<sup>12</sup> In such never-ending circuits and inclinations towards the good life, the subject both engages and loses herself. While attending optimistically to the political or the object of desire, she wears herself out, loses herself, and her relation to the world.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/picture-3-Lasse-Mouritzen.jpg> >

Figure 3. "Escalator" by Lasse Mouritzen, 2020.

These affective circuits relating to desire are furthermore closely related to augmenting or diminishing capacities of a body. As if all the contradictions in desire hold within them an immense force for destruction and of life-building capacities. Does this in-betweenness of bodily desires hold a promise beyond a "cruel optimism"?<sup>13</sup>

Apart from creating jealousy, threat, or moral superiority, what might it do to people to reveal to themselves and each other that their particular desires are unbearable in their contradictions, unknown in their potential contours, and yet demand reliable and confirming recognitions? How might it become bearable to face the ways visceral responses combine convention and something else, perhaps inarticulate or illegitimate desires? What does it mean that, unreliable in desires, we nonetheless demand the other to be perfectly attuned to what's out of tune?<sup>14</sup>

The visceral responses, our imaginations combine convention and something else, and something else is exactly what is of interest. In our desire for others and our attunement to compassionate relations beyond our current situation we face an in-betweenness that is affective and might hold a potentiality. In a Deleuzian and Spinozist understanding of affect, sad affects decrease a body's potential to act. However, to be affected is both the potential in suffering and acting from this suffering. Affective powers both come from the outside, and are acted upon through embodiments from the inside. Deleuze writes, "Every existing mode is thus inevitably affected by modes external to it, and undergoes changes that are not explained by its own nature alone."<sup>15</sup> Is it so that exactly the capacity of a body to alternate between and learn from affective states of despair, desire and depression,

actually broadens a body's capacity to act? Berlant has noted that when you attach and engage, you become something else—you lose your ground. Could it be that the oscillation between affective states and the capacity to dwell in both sad and joyous affects is what can bring subjectivities into a more holistic and sustained existence? Capitalist culture promises excitement, quick relief, and joy in every product on the market. It also upholds a state of non-attachment and non-engagement, never letting you lose your ground. Academia promises new perspectives and breathtaking results, and technology promises bright technoscientific solutions to every damage we have done to the earth. All these quick fixes, solutions and joyful experiences accelerate. They make us sick with the promises of positive affects and problem-solving effects. They tell us our desires will come true if we just believe.

How can we leave those objects of desire and replace them with collective hope? By bringing our affective states of despair into the world and holding the crisis together, we believe we can lose the objects of desire by not reproducing norms and habits. Affective states of despair are not as the melodrama of the news and the binary media narrations of good and evil. Rather bewilderment opens towards breaking this bond with norms and the hegemonies of the life we once knew. Hence, let us return to a state of despair, but let us do it collectively. We try to visit despair without harboring it but instead allowing it to make us see the crisis we are in as a way of unlearning, to truly sense this crisis we are in and hence break down the objects of desire to let other worlds and ways of being together emerge. In this regard, dissociation with the life we knew does become affirmative.

## Undercurrent Imaginations

Deep mapping in my dreams.

When hope is lost, time is our punishment.

Sometimes, we think that we can hear the sound of all the worries that are felt in the world, an ocean of worries uniting us, when we close our eyes and let go.

Undercurrents of imagining otherwise

We know from Berlant how desire and hope are related.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, that compassion easily leaks into despair. That despair is losing and fragmenting the object of desire and makes us lose the connections to our world. From the pandemic situations, we know how easily our desires leak into situations of despair and loss. Let us dwell for a moment in despair. Let us get deep into our bewilderment. Because now loneliness is awake twenty-four hours a day and the sounds and movements of despair hang in the air. Distance inhaled through every breath. Can we ever breathe again? Do we dare to exhale? Affective states are movements of breathing and inhabiting bewilderment for a while.

Affective despair—loneliness, fear, disillusion—may be, at the same time, imaginative reservoirs. If we dive into these undercurrents, could a more connected and calm existence be found? And more importantly, who would even have the resources, social

safety net, or privilege to tap into such a state while still being able to escape it when the time comes? Tasting the notion of an inhabiting of bewilderment is genuinely a privileged place to be.

As noted by Rosi Braidotti, we are all in this together. Yet, we are not one and the same —“For many indigenous people on earth, epidemics, dispossession, and environmental devastations were the mark of the colonial conquests and of the Europeans’ appropriation and destruction of First Nations cultures. Catastrophes on this scale are, for many people on earth, an everyday reality—whether we think of climate change, intergenerational transmission, or public health issues. Europeans have a lot to answer for.”<sup>17</sup> Rosi Braidotti calls for a lucidity relating to the affects involved in our current predicament and that we need to relativize them according to our own situation. We are in this together, but we are not one and the same.

From our current state of bewilderment, hope, and despair, speculation and fabulations have grown into new affective and affirmative matters. The pandemic state may have granted us the rare possibility of turning our gaze inwards, through boredom, anxiety, or isolation, drawing on our affect and everyday experience, like drifting with the undercurrents, beyond shameful subjectivities, means, or measure. Strange or challenging as this might be, turning the gaze inwards is a privileged and safe place to take shelter during a pandemic.

In times where new heteronormative homes are built worldwide and marginalised people expelled, their homes demolished. In these times where algorithms drain and capitalise on our deepest desires and find the products perpetually emerging on our screens conveniently. In these times where Earth—forests, oceans, rivers, the air—is recklessly polluted and damaged. In these times, we seem to destroy the very foundations of our living, pulling many other species into oblivion. In these times of racial inequality. In these times of borders and fenced walls. These times are indeed out of joint. How, in these times, can we dwell and feel at home? How can we have a place of connectedness, intimacy, and community that reaches beyond borders and social hierarchies?

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< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Picture-4-Lasse-Mouritzen.jpg> >




Figure 4. "Frayed Edges" by Kristine Samson, 2020.


Is it time to open up the sensitivities of home and disembody ourselves from the homes we know? A home can be a refuge from despair—a place to hide away when everything comes tumbling down. However, it can also be a place for undercurrent imaginations of despair—a home breeding alternate futures. Ursula Le Guin describes how the home is not a specific place, inhabited by specific mothers, fathers, dogs, or husbands, but instead, it is imagined; it comes into being through imagination. A shared imagination of the undercurrents? "It is real, realer than any other place, but you can't get to it unless your people show you how to imagine it—whoever your people are."<sup>18</sup> And our people are not necessarily our relatives, they may not even be alive, they could be words on a page, as Le Guin notes: "But they can guide you home. They are your human community."<sup>19</sup>

The pandemic has changed the routines and capacity of the body, the home, and city, by forming new lines of order, discipline, togetherness, loss, and bewilderment, morphing and leaking into new worlds. New worlds of discontinuity and disembodiment, being together and being unequal. Thus, bringing our attention to see this pandemic is not only a view into the many cruel truths that are thriving in our world but a gateway leading to where we enter the next world. As Arundhati Roy notes, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."<sup>20</sup> A portal to imagine otherwise our mentality, our society, and our environment. A starting point for this journey must be collective. Writing, filming, and creating worlds together is where we in this project have found hope. However, we also acknowledge that to become genuinely collective, creating and

imagining new worlds together must happen across nation-states, social groups, and power hierarchies.

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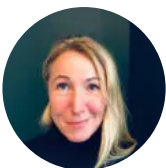
[View all of Lasse Mouritzen's articles.](#)



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## Cycles of Quotidian Pandemic Instances: Voice(less) Stories from 1918

by Paulina Lanz | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** By silencing the knowledge of our past, it will not disappear; it transforms into a hum. The hum, as a fluid object of silence can be mournful, can represent absence. The hum that we are neglecting connects with our feelings, registering as cyclic vibrations in contact with parts of the body. The vibrato of the hum speaks of unspoken relations that, according to Tina Campt, unifies quietness with sound, surrounded by affect within a register of meaningfulness. If we don't dare to remember, some images will enunciate—and speak to—the affective register. With the sonic integration of *Radio Influenza*, artist Jordan Baseman's computerized voices narrate stories from 1918 through newspaper fragments. The audible tracks add another register to the vibrations, complicating Paul Gilroy's "politics of transfiguration," where the "lower frequency" is purposefully over(p)layed mainly with a different set of forgotten histories suppressed from the war narrative. Hence, the sound is felt from an audible and visual register, enacted at the level of the quotidian narratives of twentieth-century photographs and newspaper stories. If we listen to these quiet photos, to these muffled stories, can we acknowledge that just as sonic vibrations, pandemics tend to come in waves as well? In the end, the 1918 spring influenza outbreak was followed by three waves: the fall of 1918, spring of 1919, and winter of 1919. These waves of history, sound, and pandemics, can push us to resist the neglectfulness and acknowledge what we have unlearned from the cycles of quotidian instances, time and time again.

**KEYWORDS** sound, pandemic, influenza, frequency, cycles, waves, hum

### Section 1: "A temporary failure of memory"<sup>1</sup>

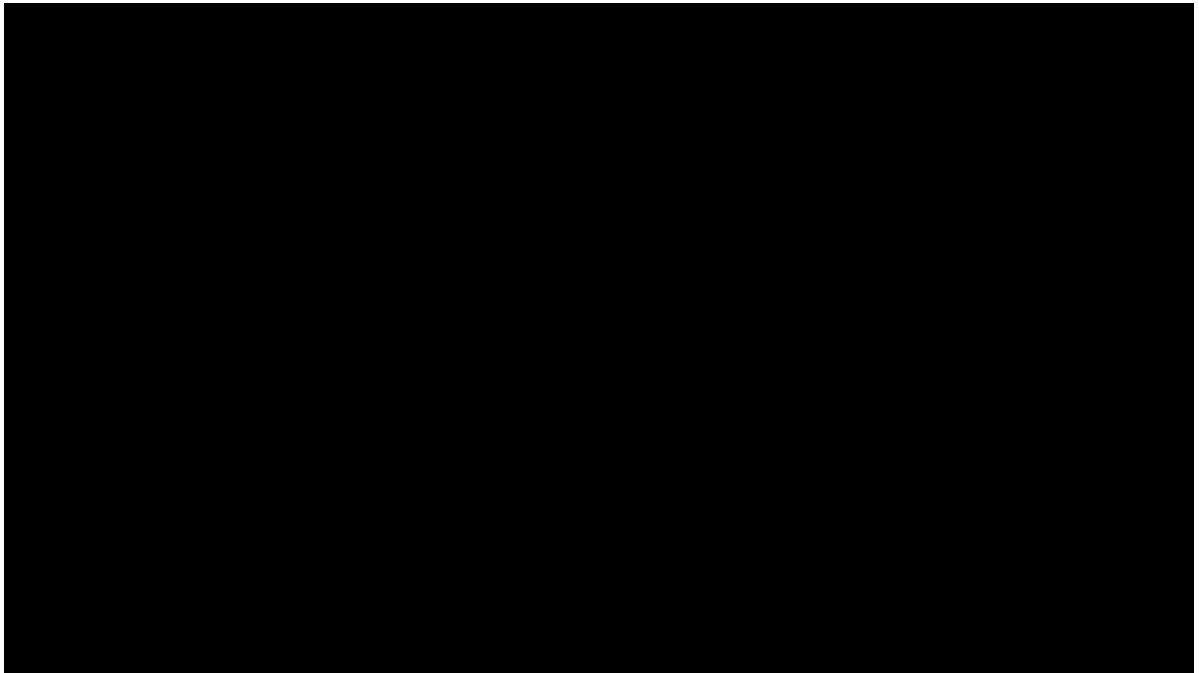
It is not our first. It won't be our last. History is bound to repeat itself. Have we learned anything from the cycles that preceded us? *We*—within all its plural form—is meant to be universal yet specific to the complex struggles of a utopian world. We are a provocation for possible and imagined futures that stray away from Stephen Duncombe's "tyranny of the possible."<sup>2</sup> We look for alternative collective futures that go beyond the constraints of the past into a current moment of multiple possibilities of the human experience. The following essay explores the embodiment of the hum<sup>3</sup> as an affective source of connection<sup>4</sup> between pandemics—past and current. Although, I acknowledge that the phenomenology and the epistemology of the hum remain largely structured around whiteness and its temporalities, here I use the hum as that which holds new modalities of perception, encounter, and engagement with and for Black diasporas and their temporalities, including Black feminist futurities.<sup>5</sup> The hum in this paper, simultaneously holds the potentialities to

differ and also find a place of connection through emotion, through affective registers experienced in vibrations (section 2), through silence(s) (section 3), and as visualsonic and sensory registers (section 4). The hum in *Radio Influenza*<sup>6</sup> serves as a collective resonance for solidarities and empathy.

We find ourselves over one hundred years after the 1918 influenza pandemic. At that time, clear communication was key. According to John M. Barry in *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*,<sup>7</sup> federal governments were transparent about the public health agenda, especially after public health messages in the United Kingdom were confusing with smoking and gatherings restrictions relaxed, and leaflet campaigns warned about the spreading disease through sneezes and coughs; in the United States quarantines on citizens, the mandatory wearing of face masks, and the closing of entertainment venues across the country translated into a lower death rate. The fifty million deaths of 1918 could remind us today that our advancements in disease prevention and control do not make us infallible. We find more similarities to the practices in 1918 than we would want. Doctors and nurses are recruited due to a shortage of medical personnel. There is a lack of mechanical ventilators; laboratory tests to recognize the virus are scarce in poorer countries just as vaccine distribution and availability, while the surplus of pharmaceutical interventions in wealthier countries also overflow with vaccine waste, as thousands of spoiled or expired unused doses are tossed every day.<sup>8</sup> Then and now, we have resorted to quarantine, isolation, and limits to public gatherings.

Our world population has grown from 1.8 billion people to 7.6 billion people in one hundred years; however, we neglect to remember our mistakes. Having local officials not be transparent with their constituents about the severity of the pandemic results in deaths, in cost of credibility, public fear, and panic. We neglect to abide by the unified messages based on evidence about what we know and what we do not know. We are neglectful during public health crises. The quick spread of the virus, the limited ways of prevention, the limited sources of treatment all respond to the challenges of surveillance capacity, fragile infrastructure, and oversight in pandemic planning. We neglect our history, where epidemics have turned into pandemics due to an increase of hosts, a global movement, mobility, and expansion of human populations, from rural to urban, to massive outbreaks.

## Cycles of Quotidien Pandemic Instances- Voice(les...



## Section 2: "Wake: . . . a region of disturbed flow"<sup>9</sup>

We keep on moving because we believe that movement is the only way forward. However, can we consider the possibility of us having idealized movement? With such movement, we have materialized the essence that proves global access, just as the blueprints of the slave ships materialize the Atlantic Slave Trade. If we stand still, we can also find movement embedded in the disruptive/disrupted sonic-mediascape that represents other registers of the double consciousness, that which W. E. B. DuBois coined the "core dynamic of racial oppression as well as the fundamental antinomy of diaspora blacks,"<sup>10</sup> These diasporas create flows where traces of breath emanate from the evaporated voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade. This disruptive process of double consciousness can also be understood as the possibility for the "other" to speak and exist. Movement unveils other dimensions of our environment, particularly those we do not render as material.

We see the unthinkable<sup>11</sup> through things that haunt us since the unthinkable connects to those silences that become present and that appear before us. Their buried inscription is now bolded, highlighted, and magnified. These voices can be noises of quietness and meaningfulness<sup>12</sup> or signals representing something other than disappearance or erasure.

In these vibrating<sup>13</sup> noises, we find disruptive patterns of obfuscation<sup>14</sup> that encounter and visualize the asymmetries of power. However, we discover different dimensions to the material, which arises through the unspeakable, the unknowable, and the unthinkable. These dimensions are silences and disruption in silences, where evidence is not necessarily corporeal and where memories are multi-mediated.

Silencing the knowledge of our past will not make that knowledge disappear; it transforms into a hum, which evokes an emotion made visible by an object surrounding the listener. A hum evokes through its vibrations; "it can be mournful; it can be presence in absence or can take the form of a gritty moan in the foreground or a soothing massage in the background. It can celebrate, animate, or accompany. It can also irritate, haunt, grate, or distract."<sup>15</sup> I ask myself about what makes the hum audible. It could be the embodiment of desire or hopefulness, or perhaps the humming of utopian dreams and aspirations. Hums evoke differently in different circumstances, whether we listen to them, to its reverb and vibrato<sup>16</sup> with our eyes closed or open. The individualized attention to the hum becomes our echo chamber where static hums converse with ethereal ones, intertwined by air and breath, which make the hum possible. These connections and conditions are brought by the consciousness of the hum—and its willful erasure. The hum can be latent or immediate, as a part of the background or foregrounding noise in different settings; the hum can be music, a voice, or even brought to life by inanimate objects. One way or another, the hum vibrates and makes us vibrate alongside it. Its movement makes us wary of its liveliness, even if overheard—but can hardly be overlooked. In the end, the hum becomes relevant to those that feel it; the environment guides its significance through sonic signals and their embedded sound marks. I could visualize the hum as a void, where emptiness is deafening, and the hum is a resonating silence. However, even if the hum were a form of isolation between the individual and the outer world, its connection to objects makes it a companion to our emotional lives, provoked by thought and senses, like the visual and the sonic. Like any other unexpected encounter, the hum brings us back to objects and reinforces their power in our everyday lives. As Sherry Turkle invites the reader of *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* to follow an object's association to understand its active presence in our lives,<sup>17</sup> I trace the hum in these same objects that capture the vibrations of our emotion, those that become our affective trail in decibels, in tone, in dissonance, and in synchrony.

The hum, as a fluid object of silence can be mournful, representing absence. The hum that we are neglecting connects with our feelings, registering as cyclic vibrations in contact with parts of the body. The vibrato of the hum speaks of unspoken relations that, according to Tina Campt,<sup>18</sup> unifies quietness with sound, surrounded by affect within a register of meaningfulness. If we don't dare to remember, some images will enunciate—and speak to—the affective register. With the sonic integration of *Radio Influenza*, artist Jordan Baseman's computerized voices narrate stories from 1918 through newspaper fragments. The audible tracks add another register to the vibrations, complicating Paul Gilroy's "politics of transfiguration,"<sup>19</sup> where the "lower frequency" is purposefully over(p)layed mainly with a different set of forgotten histories suppressed from the war narrative. Hence, the sound is felt from an audible and visual register, enacted at the level of the quotidian narratives of twentieth-century photographs and newspaper stories. If we listen to these quiet photos, to these muffled stories, can we acknowledge that just as

sonic vibrations, pandemics tend to come in waves as well? In the end, the 1918 Spring influenza outbreak was followed by three waves: the fall of 1918, spring of 1919, and winter of 1919. These waves of history, sound, and pandemics, can push us to resist neglectfulness and acknowledge what we have unlearned from cycles of quotidian instances of happenings, time and time again. Accepting cycles can be haunting, perhaps especially when considering the accompaniment made up of affect and tensions, of hums and sounds. The process of materializing sound can be confusing but without this work, it may remain in the unthinkable realm, an unreachable influence that does not affect the listener in any possible way. While denial might be a way to avoid confrontation, it is also a form of refusal, one that comes with an inability to forget. Whatever is denied then becomes another haunted place of memory, created by a collective to establish affect, to materialize absences—present or not—as well as fears and desires that have become a part of our sonic cultural register.

## Section 3: Silence as the Absence

The pandemic stories are narrated through objects—mainly through masks—bringing frequencies forward using histories and personal narratives. These intersecting objects go beyond the embodiment of an audio-spatial territory for performance;<sup>20</sup> through hums, they convey individual and collective meanings about the object and what can be said through it. In *Happy Objects*, Sara Ahmed theorizes affect and its decisive implications towards happiness through objects.<sup>21</sup> Happiness, Ahmed details, is conceived through the *hap-*, a moment of choice that precedes, through things, the contingent affects. By applying Ahmed's conversion points of affect, where the frequencies are deviated as they transition through spaces, objects, and collective engagement, memories and feelings shape emotions embodied through the objects. The pandemic's testimonies of pain disrupt the idea of forgetting, challenging, and contesting the pain of others.<sup>22</sup> By working through affect, objects surface through a deceptive "cruel optimism,"<sup>23</sup> a deviation of affect between bodies, which encounters disappointment within the archival system.

Even when materializing the 1918 stories by using computerized voices, there is no actual presence of that sound, only animated objects that perform and fluidly evolve from and through the memories they embody, that speak through the stories that created the animated objects. While some of the archival materials portray violence and death, history hums through sensorial archived sound, evoking different affective relationships from the listener to the register that the revitalized sound waves invite. The recollection embodies what Simone Browne names the "absented presence"<sup>24</sup> by transitioning from objects to memory, image, and sound. The absence comes to show in the disembodiment of governing memories—after being surveilled, intervened with, curated, and archived—transforming into transitional objects that trace abandoned narratives, according to Turkle.<sup>25</sup> The history of the 1918 influenza resonates as an uncanny reminder of survival, testimonials that hum the story of those who masked and socially distanced while facing the uncertain thoughts and feelings conveyed upon them.

We listen closely to the affective relationships we have with these objects as individuals and spectators. The recognized need for countervailing the damages of historical erasure comes from pasts made invisible in historicizing, in part through undervaluing the modality of quietness. Sound is a sensory register that overall lacks prioritization, needing to create its possibilities within the constraints of everyday life. By pushing our predisposition of the personal understanding of the material archive, the audible contests quietness through power and knowledge, embellishing the engagement through mystifying the past via erasures and silences. However, I find in silences a particular element of space and reflection. Reading the silence is finding those moments of ruptures, the inaudible and illegible mode of black noise<sup>26</sup> that reverberate in the quotidian. Breaks enable affective registers, or what Angela Carter calls attributes of instability, as spatio-temporal disruptions bring about social change and collective healing.<sup>27</sup> Without silence, there is no tempo; there is no signal; there is no hum. It becomes affective, for it resonates with the affective life of the modern subject. Silence is a tactile form of evoking memory rather than the erasure of history. Sound recognizes a need for history, for the *becoming* memory of the present to incorporate in the affective lives of the narrated history. Because there is an archive of absence, we can imply that hums, sounds, and silences have been forgotten. Even so, the modality of quietness leads to new ways of feeling sound, where the interpretation foregoes the objects, evidencing the subject's emotion.

## Section 4: The Visualsonic Resistance. . . of Non/Being<sup>28</sup>

Hence, listening to the stories beyond the images becomes complicated, especially when the focus is on sight instead of listening. When looking at the photos, the sonic frequencies of their hums<sup>29</sup> embody the surroundings and the self, where eyes become another channel for the echo chamber-mixing room, and signals clash. However, the different texture of the elements in the photographs builds up their humming potential in material streams that produce changes in the listener's body, consciousness, and way of thinking about the images in themselves. As listeners, we tip-toe around the emotions brought on by vibrations we encounter, where the hums are sorrowed, with vital breaths and static—a sigh. Silence ceases to be associated with serenity but with fear, which succumbs to our listening practice through the breaks, where the objects vibrate on the inside. The frequencies haptically translate into a harmonious way of communicating. The emotions linger through these several sensory registers going back and forth in cycles of vibration. These orchestrated stories resemble people's lives and the traces they left behind. However, the improvisational nature of affect and emotion-making in movement creates a transtemporal cultural memory. Even as we acknowledge that each story is different, I believe that a significant challenge is bringing them into conversation with each other. This connection embraces the storytellers' subjectivities and recognizes a lack of objectivity when it all comes down to the choice in happening.






The humming of the objects that make up these narratives trace a sonic map of memories. Aural politics<sup>30</sup> and intersubjectivities connect the different moments of movement that
























bind and unbind moments of intimacy with the subjects and between objects; their hums help us remember. Suppose we understand remembering as a desire to invoke memory and project forward by looking back. In that case, we could imply that the objects take on a role of bodies as archives of memory. Those objects that map the traces mix together the power narratives as a memory-mapping experience. The sonic history—and historicity—can mix through rhizomatic objects. With a non-linear and disorienting experience, sonic history is rooted—first and foremost—in the understanding of power. The hums and noise—either heard or dismissed—rely much more on the listener than on the object itself. The possibility of speech offered by hums and noise channels the abyss as a basis for evoking emotion through a visually-inflected politics of sound material culture.






According to Aristotle, reappropriation happens as the sound occurs when bodies collide in the air,<sup>31</sup> with their capabilities and disabilities. As a vibrating object sets motion and disruption of a medium, I understand this collision as a mixing-in-motion of collective memory through different moments, places, and objects. Within this wavelength emotion is at the forefront a possibility for commemoration of the past, by listening to the present, to archive for the future, as that future is *happening*. This mix preserves and includes memories as sonic annotations on the margins of databases and memorials to incorporate a hum that pervades collective memories in the memory archive and future memories. In the end, the voice(less) narratives as an apparatus-of-othering enable the openness of memory to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. In oscillation, this haunting sense of ethereal mourning is remixed and differently represented as a material recollection—and historicization—of the past.

## Notes

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<https://walkerart.org/magazine/stephen-duncombe-utopia-open-field>> . 
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<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5>> . 
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9. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 3. 
10. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 30. 
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28. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21. 
29. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 8. 
30. Josh Kun, "The Aural Border," *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25068738> < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25068738>> . 
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## Author Information



### Paulina Lanz

Paulina is a PhD candidate at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. She identifies material culture as a source of memory and nostalgia through the lens of archival and cultural studies. By examining materiality as an archival mechanism for storytelling through spatial-temporal remembrance, the visual and audible aesthetics become stimuli for developing interactions across disciplines. Paulina is a member of the Civic Paths group and involved in research in the Skid Row and Homeless Connectivity Project, and the Mobile Devices Global Mapping Project. She is a founding member and organizer of Critical Mediations, a communication and cultural studies conference.

[View all of Paulina Lanz's articles.](#)

## Article details

Paulina Lanz, "Cycles of Quotidian Pandemic Instances: Voice(less) Stories from 1918," *Lateral* 10.2 (2021).

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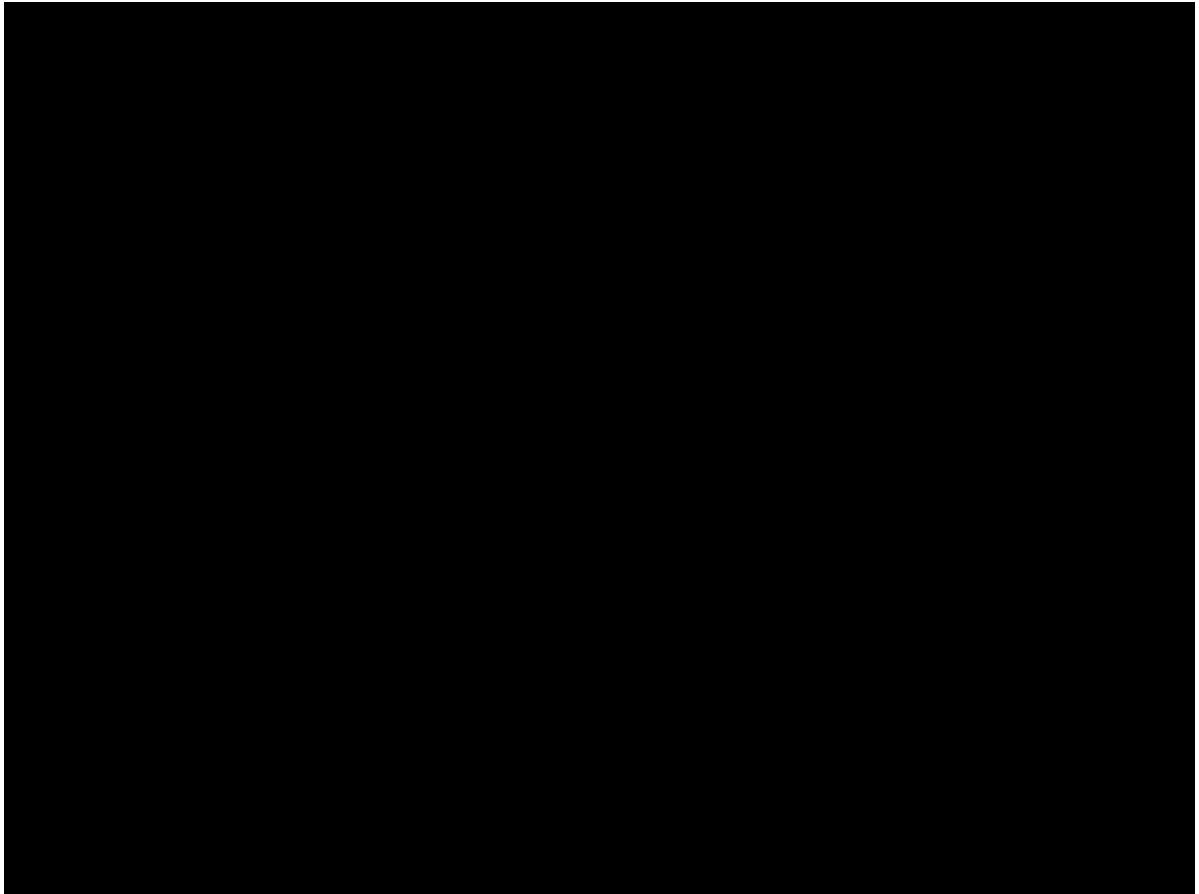
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## The Green Color of Grief: Spider-Human Dreams

by Snežana Stanković and Linda Paganelli | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** This essay tries to read the pandemic-afflicted (human) world in terms of post-human translation. In echoing Anna Tsing's call for "collaborative survival," it speaks in images of human-spiders in the forest who sense the radical isolation of humans and, thus, loss of proximity. One witnesses ill-treatment of various bodies: those that are economized, racialized, or nationalized. In this way, the essay proposes a post-human approach to distorted intimacies worldwide. It uses multimodal means of reflection: film, photography, sounds, and words. Through such a combination of nonverbal and verbal elements, the essay argues against the divisions of humans-culture-nature. It asks the reader to rethink how we could exist in equal mutuality.

**KEYWORDS** grief, pandemic, proximity, isolation, post-human, distance, spider, nature, mutuality



## Introduction

It was a March morning (year 2020). At first, I<sup>1</sup> did not notice that the world stood still. Like every other day, I marked the frame and anchor points and laid a bridge line across the top. While twisting long fibers into a continuous silk train (*fibrous proteins*) between tree branches, I sensed a strange silence. Formerly noisy and confusing, spheres of full-humans were strangely silent. They were isolated from each other.

As my home is located in the urban forest alongside the Teltow canal, which once formed part of the border between the former West Berlin and East Berlin, I often use aerial dispersal strategies to reach the city. When “released in the atmosphere,”<sup>2</sup> my silk lines help me move away from my place of residence. They help soften the enduring sadness over refugees who were shot dead while trying to cross the canal borderline and escape to the West.

That March morning, my dispersive walk toward the full-human habitat was an act of curiosity about the overwhelming silence. Playgrounds were empty, and schools closed;

you could hear only the rare steps of a random passerby or the wind blowing, causing swings to sway.

As if life were no more.

Indoor noises would pass through some windows and walls, revealing the continuing lives behind them.

Then I learned that these suddenly atomized spheres of human animals had started facing the infectious disease COVID-19 that became a pandemic. Not only did the horizons become quarantined by the walls of homes, hospitals, orphanages, nurseries, prisons, and (in the case of the homeless) street districts, but also were lives confronted by the very reality of mortality. Grief swept through the world.

## Oneiric Lamentation



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Picture-1Spider-Human-Lamentations-jpg-Linda-Paganelli.jpg> >

Figure 1. Spider-Human Lamentations by Linda Paganelli.

I was eager to keep looking at this world but not to step into it, for I feared becoming self-estranged again. Once, I was a human animal too. This is why I can still use human

language while it echoes like “murmury.” While I move along my nighttime memories, walking towards the waking life, let me “remumble” those arrrr(a)chived visions.<sup>3</sup>

My human community was famous for its ability to spin webs most beneficial and suitable for long-distance dispersals: You can imagine all those ways of physical and virtual portability and (dis)connection. Dispersing web builders would carry on by extending their webs into an insurmountable distance. Please, note, human silks are indeed similar to spider silks—they require the “continuous application of large forces to stretch a great distance before breaking.”<sup>4</sup> However, there is a sad difference between arachnid and human “work of extension.”<sup>5</sup> In my former community, web builders followed the “vertical dynamic of dominium” to acquire “rights of use and disposal.”<sup>6</sup> I admit, my current horizontal spider communities hunt, and some members are deadly predators. However, vertical human predations most often imply lethal hunter-prey relationships. So, I had to escape this (full-)human world and de-humanize myself. I let myself become bestialized<sup>7</sup> in search of freedom: while I am often repulsive in everyday life, mythopoetic thought tells stories of desire and protection. But I am neither a thought nor an image. I am alive. Yes, I may be a monster<sup>8</sup> choosing to be involved in “mutualism shown for ants and plants,”<sup>9</sup> for trees, light, and wind; a monster that need not hunt but can feed on nectar and pollen. I am a monster, similar to matsutake as described by Anna Tsing, requiring “the dynamic multispecies diversity of the forest—with its contaminating relationality.”<sup>10</sup>

The world I was looking at was affected by the pandemic, and at this very moment, while I share with you these wandering visions, it is still enduring the disease. The memory of the human inside myself can feel multiple dramas of loss. The so-called lockdown state re-introduced self-and-other separations. These isolations have produced species-by-species<sup>11</sup> and human-by-human worldviews with frozen movements and enlarged distancing. In many human worlds, touch ceased to exist.

Of course, touch can also be harmful. Such grievous proximities behind the indoor walls of homes, hospitals, or prisons seem impossible to stop. Obviously, touches can feed upon violence. This lapse is (a helpless) call not to forget.

However, touch may defy physical/ mental/ spiritual isolation. Like in the dance performance and video installation the fault lines <<https://archiv.ruhrtriennale.de/www.2013.ruhrtriennale.de/en/programm/produktionen/stuart-gehmacher-the-fault-lines/index.html>> by the choreographers Meg Stuart and Philipp Gehmacher and visual artist Vladimir Miller, persons oscillate(d) between distance and proximity. In the fault lines, bodies move in mutual fascination, tenderness and vulnerability. A scholar of theater and performance studies Krassimira Kruschkova says that “A movement which would rather be none, which prefers not to. Rapt touches bordering on violence, fierce, unrestrained and at the same time casual, oblivious. Amnesia of gestures, contingency of touch.”<sup>12</sup>

These visions go along with solitary individual and family walks in my forest. Separately, people take shelter in the forest, exchanging gratifying looks and words that immediately fade away. I want to read these forest walks as an encounter between dancing bodies with clear aerial borders “between each other without [the bodies] crossing.”<sup>13</sup>



"In all their immeasurability, incalculability—and vulnerability,"<sup>14</sup> these were exposed bodies, "exposed to touch . . . As if they were phantom pain, a painful nothingness, completely exposed to the other. Touching each other as attention and distance."<sup>15</sup>

Today, some borders are aerial and invisible, similar to the unrecognizable, unmarked, East-West borderlines. However, here, my visions do not merely coincide with the walled world of the pandemic, but also with the echoes of those (human) persons stuck in Bosnia and Herzegovina before the closure of the EU border. One of the forests bordering Croatia is not a place for a sheltered walk but an enforced refuge where one freezes and starves to death.<sup>16</sup>

My grief vibrates and stretches to release the noise of dissent.

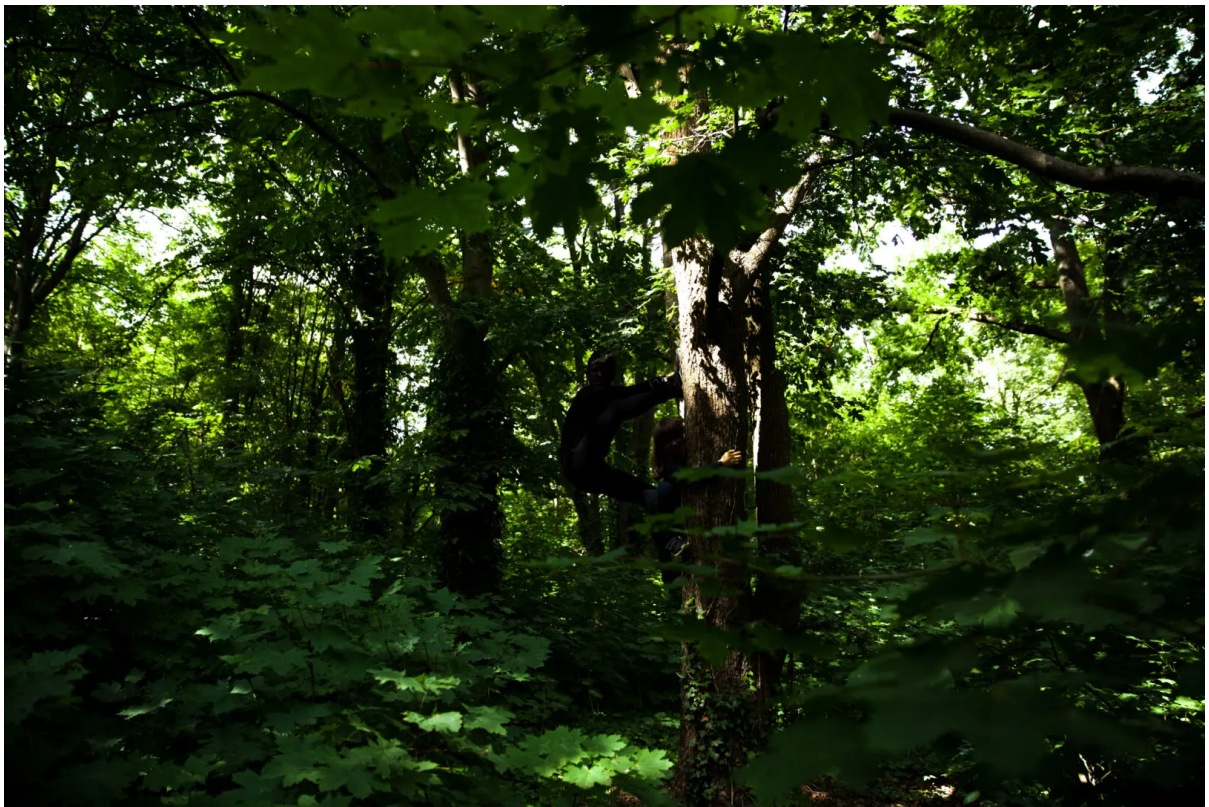
The spread of COVID-19 exposes the very nature of human vulnerability and cruelty. Strangers have become more visible. Now, even more than before, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are targeted as carriers of the virus. Namelessness in a list of ill, dying, and buried persons reminds of (cruel) hierarchies that govern the world. Falling into silence and oblivion is a dreadful scenario that confronts human animals today. As some newspapers have reported, people are devastated by the images of tractors that transport the dead (cadavers) to cemeteries.<sup>17</sup> In the Amazonian Manaus, newspaper articles revealed how the dead "were just dumped . . . like dogs" in "trincheiras [trenches]." "What are our lives worth now? Nothing?" are the kinds of questions many pose today.<sup>18</sup> Trenches dug in advance while anticipating the dead bodies, and rapid methods with no burial services change how one copes with death. With these experiences in mind, one can better comprehend Thomas Laqueur's description that "even in the crisis of the first great plague epidemic of 1348–1349, when the dead were placed in the mass graves of emergency burial grounds in their thousands, they were put there with care." Bodies would be aligned and put to rest with small coins and other offerings and by facing east, they were prepared for the resurrection.<sup>19</sup>

Who are those who are cared for today? Who is allowed to receive medical and emotional attention? Those shivering in poverty, hopelessly waiting before various kinds of doors? Most often not.

The environment is deeply grieved in its soul.

## Loss

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< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Picture-2-Spider-Humans-caught-sight-of-a-still-world-Linda-Paganelli.jpg> >

Figure 2. Spider-Humans caught sight of a still world by Linda Paganelli.

My forest-dwelling is the sadness of sensing the present-day world. I am at home, but I am homesick, for my environment suffers continual changes. My grief occurs as an enduring feeling of *solastalgia*, a feeling of disquiet caused by dramatic changes in the environment.

However, each lifeworld resists chronology and locality. Day and night collapse on top of us and flow into the "evening world." "Whom we dreamt was a shaddo . . ." <sup>20</sup> Once a liquid world, indeed, that wants to regain a never-ending flow. A fearless ingrrrrresion—a fearless cirrrrrrrrculation.

The past, present, and future are sites of imagination in the form of inherited or lived memory-dreams that long, hope, or regret. In this vein, events and locations become emotions and sensations that accompany us wherever we go. Toni Morrison speaks of images that float around us—"the remains, so to speak, at the archaeological site—surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written, and to the revelation of a kind of truth." <sup>21</sup> My grief is green as it envisions barren grounds of solitude and nothingness where the world and these grounds appear frozen in their sounds and motion. Where colors evaporate and we radically lose (our-)selves. However, as Karen Barad states in the case of nuclear landscapes, "loss is not absence but a marked presence." Questions of absence and presence are political, yet we move within the law of the void. <sup>22</sup> Whose presence counts? Whose absence moves us to wander

about and imagine the disappeared existence as something that could have been in the future?<sup>23</sup> Now, we inhabit the landscapes that must haunt us, all those landscapes of degraded lives, all the endangered and disappeared beings, and nature that ages due to its devastating exhaustion. In this vein, green is spectral through its recurrent, stubborn presence and healing that attempts to save life—the life that does not contain “racial, let alone genetic purity,” that “displays mad hospitality.”<sup>24</sup> This madness, read (im)possibility, of being always welcome erupts in playful modes of engagement and affection. Green both mutes and amplifies the world to its radical openness. Listen if you can. Sounds mutually fluctuate in taming each other: birds full of song, wind clattering through leaves, my fellow insects stridulating—buzzing, chirping, whistling. All these waves try to incorporate and nonviolently background mechanical noises. I want to radiate green in the “nonviewable” field of humans, too—to help them feel this noisy harmony. Like in Deaf worlds, as Stefan Helmreich writes, we may refuse simple binaries of (just) hearing and non-hearing, and instead, learn how to “hear-by-feeling sound,”<sup>25</sup> to enter “relational ontologies” that are “not always spoken” and “not always human.”<sup>26</sup> In that way, the audible and visible may merge into a sensory condition of green that allows us to twist together various histories and meanings, beliefs, associations, and implementations, to escape any containment—of hegemony of sight, touch, hearing . . . My personalized green is too green: “something extra has slipped”<sup>27</sup> away from my memories in the prrrroprocess of forming a dreamt freedom. Now, a humanly constructed traffic light turns green, saying: “You may pass.” Once the color of aid and care, today, it represents the sign of permission, i.e., freedom to pass.<sup>28</sup>

I mourn possible futures, for my green memory is nostologic. I use “nostologic” in the sense of aging and second childhood that Carol Mavor links to the fascination with “a tiny patch of yellow” in Jan Vermeer’s painting *The View of Delft*, which Marcel Proust invokes in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.<sup>29</sup> Nature and I age while longing to return to our first childhoods — those without awareness of acute pain in the world. However, we have to age to the second childhood that leaves us with our encapsulating emotions of tiredness and abandonment. Does it have to be this way? I rarely spot an enlivening affect “ever on the move from situation to situation, string context-orderings in eventfulness” with “its context-rocking transsituational drift” — “the life-glue of the world—a world capable of surprise (surplus-value of being).”<sup>30</sup> Does it mean that the human world is afraid of relations that affect and drag into a co-participatory state and “excess of belonging-together?”<sup>31</sup> Green used to achieve this and will hopefully continue doing so all the way, reminding of its foundation of companionship.

David Kessler would term my existential anxiety “anticipatory grief” that feels the approaching storm of the future. <sup>32</sup> The pandemic has intensified this feeling by its seeming eternity: It will never end.

Although the green color has withdrawn before the rainy and snowy winter landscapes, my sight has captured green sensations. Smells of sounds inside the naked trees echoing the color; my locomotion touches upon the remembered green surfaces while silk lines of hope emerge.



## Closure: Hopeful Wake



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Picture-3-Spider-Humans-Radical-Affectivities-Linda-Paganelli.jpg>

Figure 3. Spider-Humans Radical Affectivities by Linda Paganelli.

This is a dream-time diary. Landscapes are real “sights for more-than-human dreams.”<sup>33</sup> I want to wake you up to a life full of “indiscretions and transgressions,”<sup>34</sup> colored in green that disperses in all chromatic directions and allows disturbances that affect and relationally contaminate.<sup>35</sup> We are only alive “in the company of (in community with) other life forms.”<sup>36</sup> I am at the wake as I mourn the escalating loss of otherness,<sup>37</sup> but I do not assume my companions (are) dead. My wakeful dwelling is hope that this loss can be overcome by guarding against forgetting “significant otherness.”<sup>38</sup> Christina Sharpe writes about “the work of staying in the wake” of slavery by asking, “how can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state?”<sup>39</sup>

You are reading post-human lines that want to dissent from the human-centered worldview. I am not a metaphor nor a concept,<sup>40</sup> but an embodied quest for mutually affecting relationality.

Allow me a human reflection. I will understand the fellow reader who ponders on my ability to transmit the pandemic-afflicted world. One might discuss my human-centered

narration,<sup>41</sup> and I admit that it is a translational move that uses the old semantic tools I kept all along after escaping the full-human spheres. Solastalgia and nostalgia blend through my mutation through a longing for boundary-crossing entanglements and more-than-human love. As I am a life in transition, some human traces, like hands and visions, are inconsistent with my ethereal mode of attachment. Feel frrrrreeee to approach, for I am Maman,<sup>42</sup> a wall-less house-like being with green freedom(s) to pass and enable us to come across each other(s).


## Acknowledgments
















Our profound gratitude goes to the editors of this forum, Mattia Fumanti and Elena Zambelli. This visual essay would not have been possible without their devotion and support. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable suggestions (especially concerning the affects of colors). We had the good fortune to work with Gisela Lindeque, whose editing work is first and foremost a refined engagement with the thematic, stylistic, and lexical choices of the essay. A deep thank you to Anđelka Zečević, Željana Tunić, and Heiko Dietrich for our extended inspirational conversations. This collaborative piece is dedicated to Mia, Zeno, and Adriano Lostia, whose support has remained throughout.

## Notes

1. The narration uses the pronoun “I,” which stands for the poetic subject of the Spider-Human. [↗](#)
2. Dries Bonte, “Cost-Benefit Balance of Dispersal and the Evolution of Conditional Dispersal Strategies in Spiders” in *Ecophysiology*, edited by Wolfgang Nentwig (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 67–68. [↗](#)
3. In *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, poetic terms like “murmury/mummery” are tied to dream visions and night memories that prevail during the subject’s waking state. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin Books, 2000); John Bishop, *Joyce’s Book of the Dark: Finnegans Wake* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986). [↗](#)
4. Todd A. Blackledge, “Spider Silk: Molecular Structure and Function in Webs” in *Spiders Ecophysiology*, edited by Wolfgang Nentwig (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 267–268. [↗](#)
5. Blackledge, “Spider Silk,” 267–68. [↗](#)
6. Annabel Brett, “Is There Any Place for Environmental Thinking in Early Modern European Political Thought?” in *Nature, Action and the Future*, edited by Katrina Forrester and Sophie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 27. [↗](#)
7. I am aware that the process of bestialization can trigger confusion with the human concept of bestiality and brutality. Here I mean an elusive distortion contained within the coexistence of ugliness and beauty. [↗](#)
8. Julian C. H. Lee, Hariz Halilovich, Ani Landau-Ward, Peter Phipps, and Richard J. Sutcliffe, *Monsters of Modernity* (Leeds: Kismet Press, 2019). [↗](#)

9. Dirk Sanders, "Herbivory in Spiders" in *Spiders Ecophysiology*, edited by Wolfgang Nentwig (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 385. [↗](#)
10. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 40. [↗](#)
11. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 139. [↗](#)
12. Krassimira Kruschkova, "The Fault Lines of Touching," in *Touching and Being Touched*, edited by Gabriele Brandstetter, Gerko Egert and Sabine Zubarik (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 105. [↗](#)
13. Kruschkova, "The Fault Lines of Touching," 108. [↗](#)
14. Kruschkova, "The Fault Lines of Touching," 108. [↗](#)
15. Kruschkova, "The Fault Lines of Touching," 108. [↗](#)
16. Danijel Kovacevic, "Migrants, Refugees Spurn Return to Torched Camp in Bosnia," *BalkanInsight*, January 4, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/04/migrants-refugees-spurn-return-to-torched-camp-in-bosnia> < <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/04/migrants-refugees-spurn-return-to-torched-camp-in-bosnia> > . [↗](#)
17. Aylin Woodward and Dave Mosher, "Sobering photos reveal how countries are dealing with the dead left by the coronavirus pandemic," *Business Insider*, April 13, 2020. [↗](#)
18. Tom Phillips and Fabiano Maisonnave, "'Utter Disaster': Manaus Fills Mass Graves as Covid-19 Hits the Amazon" *The Guardian*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/30/brazil-manaus-coronavirus-mass-graves> < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/30/brazil-manaus-coronavirus-mass-graves> > ; see also "Mass Graves Being Dug and Long Queues Forming at Banks as Brazil's Covid-19 Crisis Deepens," YouTube, April 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQYvA6NjOdo> < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQYvA6NjOdo> > . [↗](#)
19. Thomas Walter Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 126. [↗](#)
20. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*; also, Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark*. [↗](#)
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22. Karen Barad, "No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetime-mattering" in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 103–20. [↗](#)
23. Barad, "No Small Matter." [↗](#)
24. Dorion Sagan, "The Human is More than Human: Interspecies Communities and the New 'Facts of Life,'" *Fieldsights* (2011): <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-human-is-more-than-human-interspecies-communities-and-the-new-facts-of-life> < <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-human-is-more-than-human-interspecies-communities-and-the-new-facts-of-life> > . [↗](#)
25. Stefan Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 167. [↗](#)
26. Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits*, 171. [↗](#)
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31. Massumi, "Too-Blue," 191. 
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33. Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 152. 
34. Sagan, *The Human is More than Human*. 
35. Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 152. 
36. Augustine Fuentes, "The Whole is More than the Sum of the Parts: Extended Minds and Extended Selves," *Fieldsights* (2011): <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-whole-is-more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts-extended-minds-and-extended-selves> < <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-whole-is-more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts-extended-minds-and-extended-selves> > . 
37. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003). 
38. Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*. 
39. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 20. 
40. Joanna Bourke, *Loving Animals: On Bestiality, Zoophilia, and Post-Human Love* (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2020), 145. 
41. David Herman, *Narratology beyond the Human* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 139–40. 
42. See Louise Bourgeois, *Maman (Ama)*, 1999, cast 2001 in bronze, marble, and stainless steel, 29' 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 32' 1<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 38' 5<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>", <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/10856> < <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/10856> > . 

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## Author Information



### Snežana Stanković

Snežana Stanković is a postdoctoral researcher who teaches at the Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION (European University Viadrina). Her ethnographic and archival works concern lifeworlds of human and nonhuman subjects in post-catastrophic areas. Being particularly interested in (in)tangible landscapes



of coexistence, she pays attention to atmospheres, cemeteries/ monuments/ memorials, archives, and storytelling to follow possibilities of experiential and emotional translatability across different cultural and often politically conflictual settings. In pursuing her research, she brings into dialogue anthropological discussions on aging societies, forced migration, humanitarianism, policymakers, poverty, and the environment. Together with the visual anthropologist Linda Paganelli, she has been researching official and personal memories and commemoration of the Holocaust and Romani Genocide in Croatia and Serbia, as well as funeral laments and afterlives of the deceased in the Western Balkans and Sardinia.

[View all of Snežana Stanković's articles.](#)



## [Linda Paganelli](#)

Linda Paganelli is an Italian artist, visual anthropologist, and experimental film director based in Berlin. She specialized in Visual Anthropology following a Master's Degree at Goldsmiths and since then she has worked in (post)conflict zones like Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the Western Balkans, and on sensitive issues in Europe, combining visual art, filmmaking, and anthropology. Her works have been selected at many international film and art festivals, galleries, and academic conferences. Her topics concern mainly belonging, migration, death, and gender. Her approach is inclusive and has its foundations in a decolonial, queer \* feminist, and migrant perspective. She aims to creatively engage participants of every age, gender, status, ethnicity, and creed to generate a communitarian healing artistic practice. She collaborates regularly with DaMigra e.V., Rete Donne e.V., Humboldt University, Viadrina University, Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION, Bezirksamt Neukölln, and GlogauAIR. She also leads the Berlin Film Community, which has 12,300 members.

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## Article details

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## Plants, Vegetables, Lawn: Radical Solidarities in Pandemic Times

by Giulia Carabelli | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope,  
Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** This essay presents photos and words illustrating practices of care in homes shared by humans and plants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on interviews with plant carers, I highlight how humans (re)discovered plants as kin during forced social isolation. I reflect on how plants provided joy, hope, and reassurance during crisis, enabling strong affective bonds with their human carers. I read the creation/cementing of affective bonds between humans and plants for its political significance, and I interrogate the activity of making home/kin with plants as the emergence of interspecies solidarities, which challenge anthropocentric narratives of worldmaking and reinsert non-human beings as central to the making of more just and inclusive futures.

**KEYWORDS** affect, solidarity, care, pandemic, plants

### My Plants and I

I have been moving countries and jobs, and I have created new microcosms of living every few years, for many years. My experience of being rootless instructed ways of being that were always temporary, borrowed, and projected to the future in the absolute and constant need to find and create new space where I could exist with purpose. This overwhelming condition of precariousness fostered the assumption that I could never have plants or cats, or even too many things—all of which require stability because they don't travel well. But the promise of a three-year employment contract came with the unpractised feeling of a more stable kind of precarity.

I moved into a new apartment in September 2019 and began populating rooms with plants shortly after. Within months, I had plants everywhere. They are of different sizes and shades of green, except for the pink, purple, and white orchids in the middle of the dining table. Thanks to large windows and a southern exposure, my plants grew steadily, offering beauty, comfort, and the possibility of groundedness.

I like having them around when I work. To stop and inspect leaves has become a way of taking short breaks. I salute them when opening my eyes in the morning and wish them good night before switching the lights off. I spend time looking for pots that might better complement their natural traits, and I get upset and worry when they don't do well. I came

to feel responsible for my plants because they depend on me, whilst being aware that nurturing our relationship is mutually beneficial.

Once the first lockdown started in Northern Ireland, where I lived until August 2021, I found myself at home with my plants and I thanked them for being there, unconditionally. If socializing with humans was now forbidden, my plants were free to spend more time with me—repotting, trimming, repositioning, and propagating became daily routines and infiltrated my conversations with distant humans for many months to come, through new lockdowns and the seasonal change.

This essay elaborates on human-plant entanglements under conditions of pervasive global vulnerability and social isolation. I read the process of making home with plants during the pandemic as the emergence of more than human solidarities, which might support the creation of a future where all beings are treated equally and with justice. The essay is written in dialogue with the visual and aural material I collected since June 2020 as part of the *Care for Plants* project, which I initiated to study homemaking and care practices during the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>1</sup> The visual material (often accompanied by short testimonies) is archived in a dedicated Instagram page (IG:CareForPlants). As a supplement, I also conducted interviews (remotely) in July and October 2020.<sup>2</sup>

## Care with Plants

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[@tinyplotofplants](#)' garden is so beautiful and even more so because it connects three generations of women! Such a beautiful story 🌱💖❤️ Thank you for sharing it with us !!! "I try to grow seeds every year, normally my mum and I do it together, but this year its been a bit rubbish because we have had to do it separately. She's been keeping me up to date with all her pictures she sends me which is class - her garden is much more established than mine! I have only really gotten interested in plants these past few years. I remember my granny phoning my mum to tell her gardeners world was on the tv and I would quickly vacate the living room! Now my mum is phoning me to say its on! My granny is no longer with us, but my mum has taken cuttings from the fushias in her garden and is bringing them on for me. Its just nice to have something I can look at and think that its linked to my granny."

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It was kind of like a perfect storm of shit things to happen in my life. And then yeah, running, along with gardening, like, kind of gave me something to get up and do in the morning, but it was like even when I got up in the morning if I was feeling awful I was like oh I have to go out and check the plants. And then you go out and see a little seedling got about this much bigger [shows with fingers how much] or would have more leaves. And like, oh my god, I was so buzzing! Like last week when my first tomato plants grew their first green tomatoes I was buzzing for the whole day. . . . I feel probably the same as a lot of people, lockdown's kind of made you reassess what you take from life and I think I didn't really realize how much I was missing nature and being in greenery and stuff before. . . . You might not be able to get that always if you live in a city, but you can always have a houseplant or have something there. I don't know what it is, they're just kind of peaceful I suppose, like makes you reconnect with like I don't know, who . . . you're supposed to be in nature. (B., Interview, 07 July 2020)





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Good morning for [@merita.zekovic](#) ' garden 🇩🇪 a true explosion of colours 💖🌺🌻🌿

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"[Care] For me it is to go out in the morning on the terrace and the first thing I see are the flowers and then I see the green lawn, and it gives me motivation for the whole day. I mean sometimes I spend hours here and my whole family wonders why do I sit for so much time on the terrace! But for me it's the perfect place"  
@merita.zekovic

Care, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa writes, is "vital in interweaving a web of life" that reveals interconnections and interdependency among earthly creatures.<sup>3</sup> Surely, the act of caring remains ambivalent as it might as well be the agent of oppressive and colonizing projects.<sup>4</sup> And I wish for this tension between care as patronizing and care as transformative to remain present in my account of plant care. Yet, thinking about care—why do we care for something and how caring for something changes our relationship with it—enables me to make sense of the human-plant relationships I present here as emancipatory. By presenting testimonies of plant carers, I point to the process of becoming aware of how plants care for humans. I also reflect on how the shaping of more than human relationships can be generative of new (and more radical) projects of living, understanding, and appreciating the domestic space as political. Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese write that care materializes an "affective connecting tissue" that enables relationships.<sup>5</sup> The *Care for Plants* project captures the emergence of affective bonds with plants. With Cubellis, I read care as an affective process that becomes crucial in crises such as the COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> What makes care radical is its capacity to establish affective bonds that sustain and encourage a reassuring navigation of a precarious present by expanding a (positive) horizon of possibility. Radical care supports projects of remaking worlds that imagine the future as more just and inclusive. In the examples I gathered, care is radical because it allows humans to understand that their activity of care is shared *with* plants. Humans are no longer centered as carers.

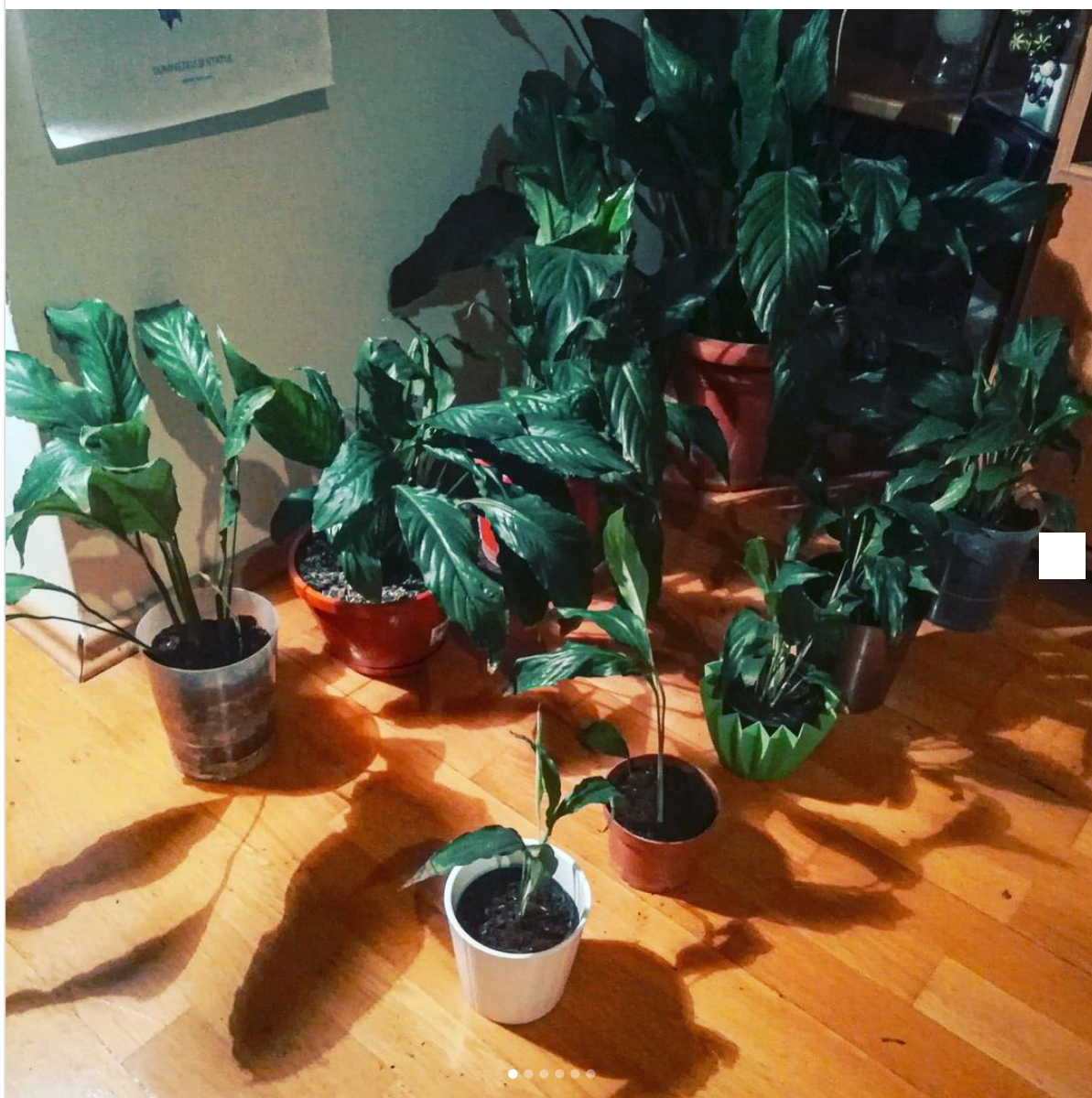




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I love this little story from [@hopancarusel](#) 🇷🇴 on what we learn from plants by listening to them 🌿🗣️: "🌱🌻  
During the lockdown, when I would go out of the house only once a week, I realized how profoundly I am connected with nature and how acutely I feel its lack of presence. So I started getting more plants and gardening in my little rented flat in Bucharest. Such a good way to cope with the anxiety and alienation of these times. A few days ago, I managed to repot and propagate these two generous beauties: a Pilea and a Peace Lily, which were suffering a bit due to my period of overwork and their need for more space. They each gave me 7-8 little plants, which I can now give or exchange with friends who have also found strength in this amazing connection with plants.  
Last year, my little indoor garden has taught me some valuable lessons about nurturing, and how

sometimes less is more, you just have to listen to the different rhythms and watering needs of each being. This year, it is teaching me about resilience, (self)care and generosity during difficult times. I thank my plants greatly for that 🍀🌱🥰"

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## Solidarity

Central to this project is an understanding of solidarity as a political project that reinforces networks of care to push for change. Solidarity appropriates care practices as a means to create movement, to support spaces of involvement, discussion, and to strengthen bonds between carers/cared for that are affective. Existing conversations on the possibility of more than human solidarity often focus on agency and debate whether non-human beings are capable of partaking in political projects.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, I capture the emergence of more than human solidarities in the affective bonds that entangle humans and plants. I resist the notion of human agency as the sole motor of change in favour of an understanding of agency as affective. Jane Bennett postulates "thing-power" as the liveliness and affectivity of all matter that initiates change.<sup>8</sup> *Care for Plants* gathers and archives examples of how practices of care between humans and plants support affective exchanges that point to worldmaking projects where human centeredness is challenged in favour of an appreciation of interdependence. I reflect on the creation/cementing of affective bonds between humans and plants for its political significance. I interrogate the activity of making home/kin with plants as the emergence of interspecies solidarities, which challenges anthropocentric and colonial narratives of worldmaking and reinsert non-human beings as central to the making of more just and inclusive futures.<sup>9</sup>

## The Moment We are Living Now





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A succulent love story from 🇧🇪 "When the second lockdown was announced, I decided to give myself a chance at caring for plants, by starting with succulents. I prepared by getting advice from family and friends, and then found myself 5 little friends: jade, horse's teeth, hoyo kerri, fenestraria, and the common houseleek. They have a central place at the coffee table in the living room where they can get sunlight, but also where I can see them from every part of the room. I know there are many ways in which plants care for us - the most obvious one for me is that they make me feel a little less lonely, and a little more happy by how gorgeous and charming they are." ❤️❤️❤️ Happy Sunday ! 🌱

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Talking to people during a global pandemic presented a panorama of abrupt change and loss. I approached interviews with broad questions about daily routines, the future, and the meanings of making-life-with-plants. Conversations were often emotional, at times revealing the anger, resentment, and inability to make sense of a raw feeling of loss. For many, life had become an extended present of anxieties, fears, fatalism, and slow movements. Yet, to talk about plants created safe spaces in which to re-engage with the present more positively. In fact, plants allowed my participants to envision the future filled with hope (and life)—expectations of vegetables ripening, or cuttings to root. All the photos I received immortalize the beauty of luxuriant plants.

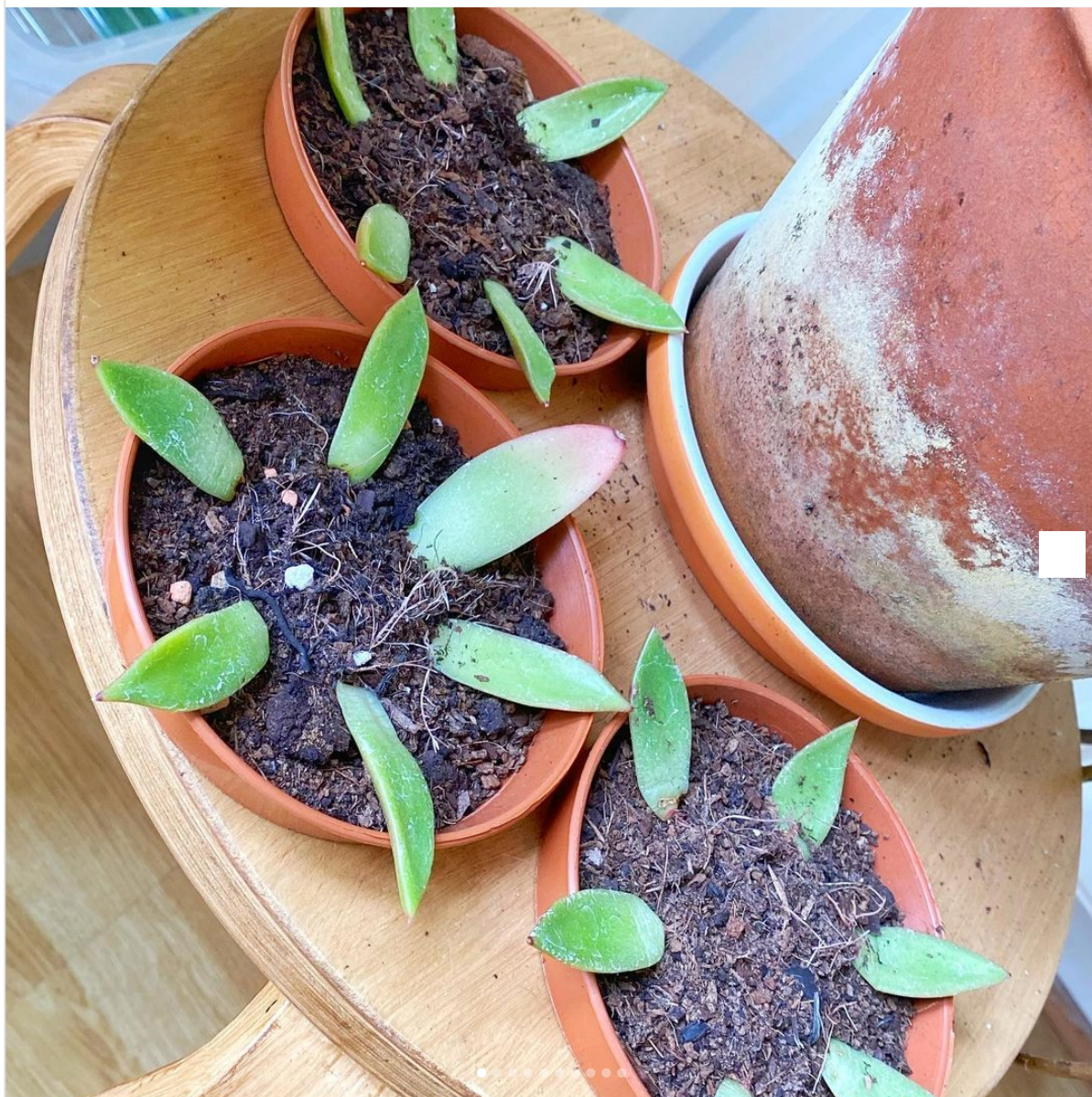
When I started the interviews, many of my respondents were no longer in lockdown but continued to isolate or limit their social exchanges as a precautionary measure. For all, life had shrunk largely to the space of the home where many lived alone. Thus the lockdown initiated a process of getting reacquainted with domestic space, and plants became a crucial part of this process. All my respondents acquired new plants during the lockdown and over subsequent months. While a few purchased new plants, many exchanged cuttings and seeds in person or via mail, giving new meanings to human friendships, which developed thanks to a shared love for plants.





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Meet [@sarahjanko](#) her beautiful 🐱 Merlin ❤️ and their amazing [#indoorjungle](#) "I started collecting plants when a colleague gave me an avocado plant she had grown and showed me how to propagate a spider plant we had in our office. At the time I had just moved to England - away from my friends and support system in Ireland - and was spending a lot of time at home (with my cat, Merlin). I loved watching those first plants grow, the routine of looking after them, as well as the life, colour and texture they brought into the space. So I kept accumulating plants when I could, and propagating them to fill every corner. When I finally moved back to Belfast a few years later, I carefully transported my collection with me.

Flash forward to the pandemic: lockdown has revived a familiar feeling of isolation from those years in

England. With the amount of plants I have (last count ~40), watering, trimming, propagating them, etc. was already a regular part of my routine. But now, I'm reminded of how much they add aesthetically to the space I'm confined to and serve as a satisfying task to invest my energy into. Being around my plants constantly has allowed me to appreciate all the small changes as they grow; new leaves bring me an embarrassing amount of joy as does figuring out how to revive sickly plants. I've been propagating more than ever before, and swapping clippings with nearby friends. There's also a certain amount of nostalgia about particular plants that have been gifted, propagated or found over the years and how far they've travelled with me. I think it helps to ground me in a time defined by uncertainty and isolation."

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"I bought plants online and because I was at home so much more, I was nesting, you know . . . Lockdown luxury, right?! So yeah, my pandemic privilege has been to be able to nest more, so, I bought more plants and I could spend more time sort of fussing over them." (X., Interview 09, July 2020)

A certain houseplant-craze phenomenon preexisted the COVID-19 pandemic. Often associated with a millennials' aesthetic that favours geometrical lines, Scandinavian furniture, pastel palettes, and green foliage, plants have become increasingly central to domestic life. The attraction to plants' aesthetics—they beautify space and make it cosier—was present in all the accounts I collected and, to many, was the reason they first bought a plant. But living with plants and, especially, sharing home with plants during the pandemic made humans look at them anew.

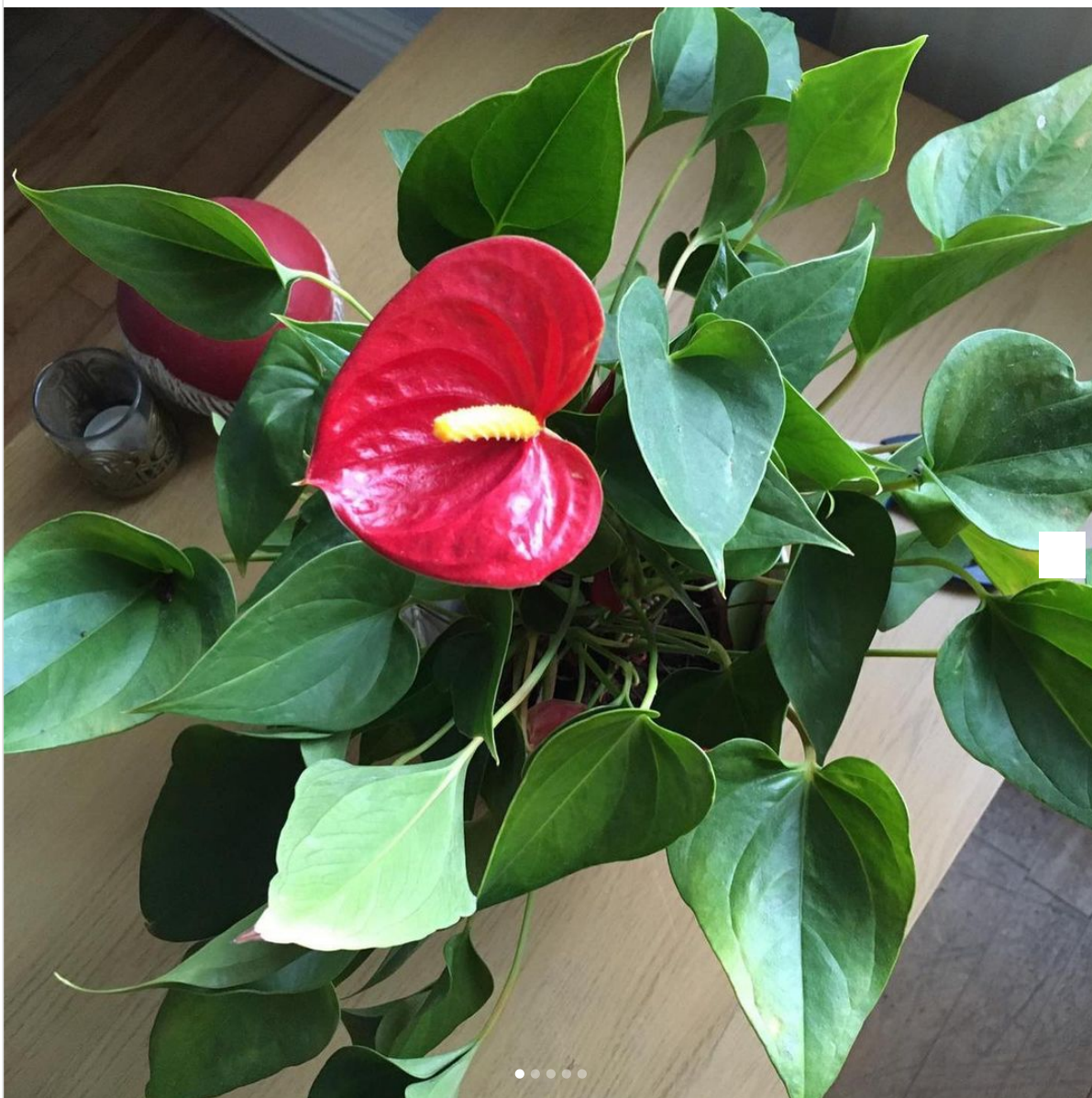
## Staying Home, with Plants





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[@poccittedda](#) 's plants family - the red anturium traveller across the Irish border before lockdown started and the garden blossomed also thanks to extra isolation-care 🌺🌻🌻🌻🌻❤️

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"Everything that is within the house has a slightly different weight in my life now. And somehow the plants are not just something that is there, but something that is there and is your responsibility" ... I think it's . . . it's not just it's beauty that they offer, it's also, well, there's the whole flowers attract the bees and . . . and you feel that they also have other companions that come with them. . . . I think it has been beautiful in the quarantine how many people who didn't necessarily pay attention to houseplants or the garden and now . . . it is something! I have seen it even with friends with one lonely tomato plant on their little balcony and they are sharing pictures, etc. And that's a bond that probably last year didn't exist." (M., Interview, 07 July 2020)

To many, living in confined spaces with plants meant to acknowledge plants as household members rather than pretty objects. Erika Cudworth, writing about life with dogs, argues that "posthumanist households problematize boundaries between humans and other creatures in terms of relationships, behaviour and use of space"—as the production of "muddled life."<sup>10</sup> For Cudworth, the posthuman home is a site of "resistance, and refuge from, an exploitative and exclusionary public world."<sup>11</sup> Plants too shape intimacies and ground politics of belonging. The loss of sociality with humans re-valored an already existing sociality with plants, which was often taken for granted or never fully explored or appreciated. Especially because plants, differently from pets, can feed their housemates.



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A new story on growing vegetables in the lockdown 🥕🥕🥕👩: "I planted the seeds with my daughter in March during the lockdown and now we harvested the carrots prematurely 😅 Unfortunately the plant got little greenflies and all attempts to tackle this naturally were not effective (water the plant with coffee or nettle tea; we also collected some ladybugs outside and the greenflies got less, but then they took over again 😅) Anyhow, this is our tiny lockdown harvest, they were actually quite delicious and for my daughter much easier to eat than normal size carrots 😊"

Add a comment...

For many, the process of realizing/accepting plants as kin was articulated in terms of love and I became aware of how a plant that offers beauty or sustenance is love. Will McKeithen reappropriates the trope of the "crazy cat lady" to explore queer geographies of home.

Love for cats—imagined as excessive and misplaced (and thus *crazy*)—reveals multispecies co-productions of intimacy that disrupt human/animal hierarchies.<sup>12</sup> And so it was for my respondents who shared their love for plants. Some addressed their plants as “babies” or “friends” pointing to the intimate relationships they had developed—though many laughed and apologized for sounding *weird*.

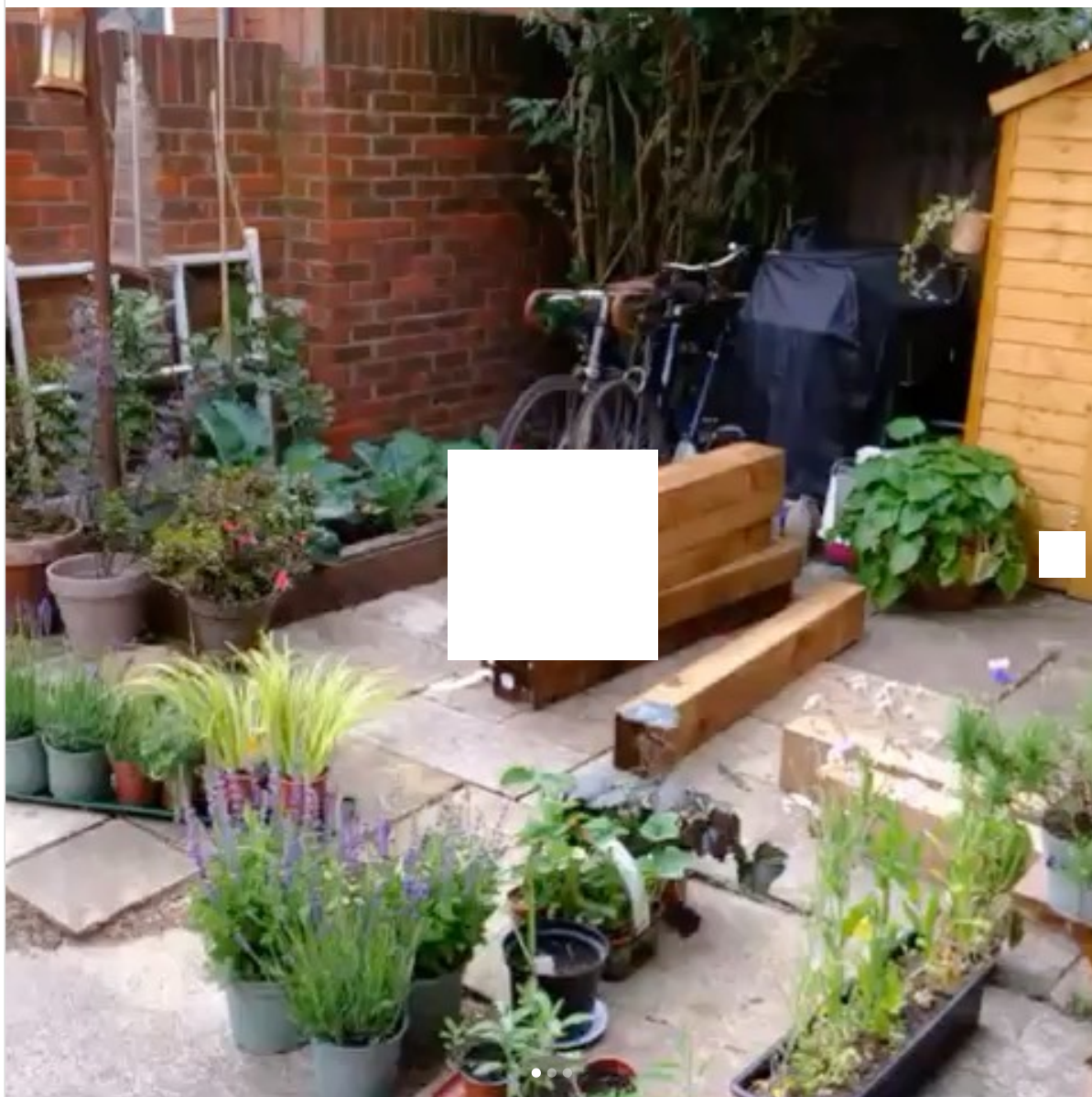
## The Search for Joy and Respite from a Deadly Pandemic





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Thank you [@camilacocina](#) for sharing highlights of your garden which looks gorgeous !!! 🍷💖🌻 video1.  
The garden has become probably the most important space in the house. I spend so much time there during the lockdown, that it has been natural to spend energy and labour on it to make it nicer for us, the cat and the bees

Photo2. This little project of a moss and stones garden has grown over the last weeks. Looking at it makes me smile at least once a day

Photo3. Every year we plant vegetables and herbs. The quarantine vegetables are more exciting than ever: courgettes, broad beans, tomatoes, carrots, strawberries..

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"Last week I had a very bad week and it was weeks that I wanted to remove some ivy and I was . . . I was so angry I needed to do something, you know, and I spent two hours removing it and cutting it. . . . And then I calmed down, I sat down and I did it properly again, and I was ok. So, I think that's also why my relationship with the garden became so completely intertwined with my daily life . . . is because of depression, you know, and at one point it [the garden] becomes a resource to reemerge from the dark place where you find yourself." (Z., Interview, 07 July 2020)

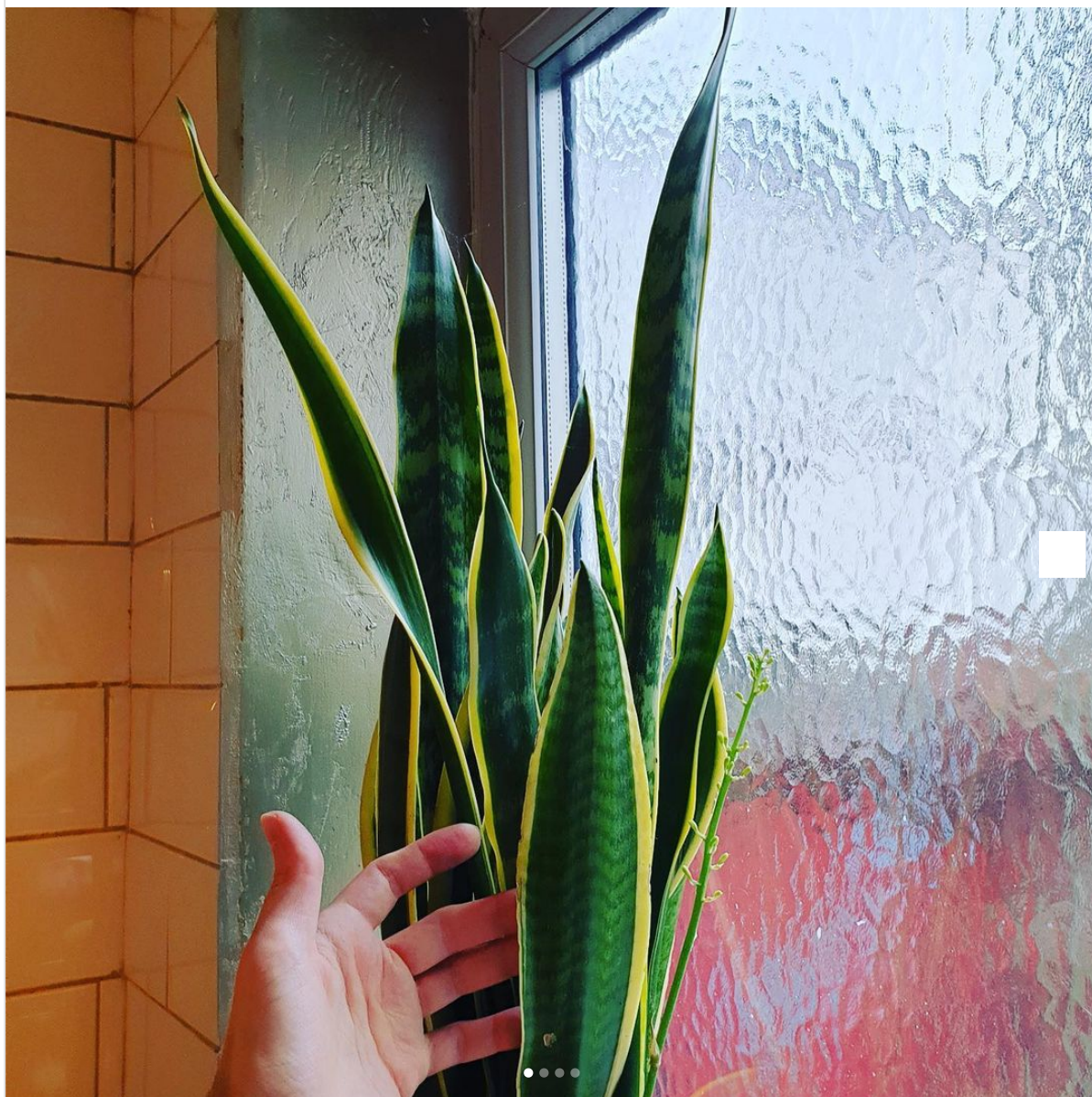
These stories show how "we become attached and even responsible for entangled human and non-human others."<sup>13</sup> For many of my respondents, plants have been a constant household presence while, for others, they were a pandemic discovery. Amidst fears, anxieties, and isolation, plants offered a kind reminder that life goes on. They leafed and flowered, adjusted to light, and multiplied. They offered moments of joy, and transformed a space of isolation into a space of (self) care. The testimonies I collected also bear witness to transformative processes whereby humans realized the importance of plants and wished to find ways to communicate their appreciation for them. For example, humans felt as they needed to do more research to understand how to better care for plants—how to listen to plants' needs and interpret their moods. Some joined online communities to exchange tips, others approached local horticultural societies and bought books. For many, becoming entangled with plants meant to realize that plants take care of humans too.

The *Care for Plants* project is still assembling stories of life with plants to reflect on whether forced social isolation, social distancing, and, more generally living through a global pandemic, favoured the emergence of new ways to approach and understand the roles of non-human beings in human life. Despite the diversity among the experiences I collected, there is one common thread: the reconsideration of plants as more than objects, but as active beings in the making of (non)human bonds and social relations. I think of this process as a radical form of hope, one that promises a transformative trajectory that nurtures new understandings and practices among and between humans and plants, which may lay the groundwork for a more just, equal and ecologically sustainable future. And now, as Natasha Myers suggests, "we need to learn not just how to collaborate, but also how to *conspire with the plants*, to breathe with them."<sup>14</sup>



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More from [@lukebushnellwye](#) 's 🏠🌱 :: These are simply the plants I've had the longest! As well as the spider plant you saw yesterday, the peace lily, snake plant, and the weeping fig are the ones I've had since I finished my masters, got a job, and finally had a bit of disposable income to spend on making my home space a bit nicer, in a space I wanted to actually make my home. They've grown with me since then, with the snake plant even rewarding me this month by flowering for the first time in the four years I've had it!

The small straggly looking sansevieria is even older, as it is the only survivor from the five-pack of succulents and cacti I bought from IKEA ahead of moving to university for the first time, thirteen years



ago. We've both been through some things in the meantime.


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## Notes

1. *Care for Plants* is one of three projects contributing to a pilot research on Caring through Vulnerability: Exploring Affect and Emotion during COVID-19, which I developed with Drs. Lisa Smyth and Teresa Degenhardt with funding from Queen's University Belfast in June 2020. [↗](#)
2. Where photos and/or stories have been published on the *Care for Plants* Instagram page and the author chose to be tagged with their Instagram handle, the same is reported in this essay. Extracts from interviews have been anonymized. [↗](#)
3. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 4. [↗](#)
4. Carolyn Ureña, "Loving from Below: On (De)colonial Love and Other Demons," *Hypathia* 32, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12302> < <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12302> > . [↗](#)
5. Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care. Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," *Social Text* 38, no.1 (2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7971067> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7971067> > . [↗](#)
6. Lauren Cubellis, "Gestures of Care and Recognition: An Introduction," *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.1.01> < <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.1.01> > . [↗](#)
7. See Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: the ecological crisis of reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Sally J. Scholz, "Political Solidarity and the More-Than-Human World," *Ethics and the Environment* 18, no. 2 (2013): 81–99, <https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.18.2.81> < <https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.18.2.81> > . [↗](#)
8. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). [↗](#)
9. For a discussion on Indigenous theories on non-human agency and anti-colonial engagement, see Jerry L. Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott L. Pratt, "The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement," *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 3-4 (2020): 331–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830135> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830135> > . [↗](#)
10. Erika Cudworth, "Muddled Living: Making Home with Dog Companions," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 41, no. 3-4 (2021): 425, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-08-2019-0165> < <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-08-2019-0165> > . [↗](#)
11. Cudworth, "Muddled Living," 424. [↗](#)
12. Will McKeithen, "Queer Ecologies of Home: Heteronormativity, Speciesism, and the Strange Intimacies of Crazy Cat Ladies," *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1276888> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1276888> > . [↗](#)
13. Joanna Latimer and Gómez D. López, "Intimate Entanglements: Affects, More-than-Human Intimacies and the Politics of Relations in Science and Technology," *The Sociological Review* 67,



no.2 (2019): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119831623> <  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119831623>> . 

14. Natasha Myers, "How to Grow Liveable Worlds: Ten (Not-So-Easy) Steps for Life in the Planthropocene," *ABC Opinion*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548> <  
<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548>> 

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[View all of Giulia Carabelli's articles.](#)

### Article details

Giulia Carabelli, "Plants, Vegetables, Lawn: Radical Solidarities in Pandemic Times," *Lateral* 10.2 (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.2.14>

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## Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic

by Frank Karioris | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope,  
Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Amidst the despair, desperation, death, and economic deprivation of the pandemic, poetry—and creative outlets more broadly—have arisen to assist us in both making sense of the world at large, as well as addressing our own struggles during and from these challenges. This essay seeks to put these works into conversation as part of a process—along with quarantine—of seeding, an opportunity to grow new roots and networks. Drawing from a field of established literary journals and ones established during and explicitly to address the pandemic, the essay aims to begin a process of distilling the ways that even amongst fear and loss we must (and will) find ways to find joy. This requires us to seek out new forms of elegy that elaborate and understand the importance of relations and joys between peoples, and the new relational possibilities that our life holds for us as we move towards a post-pandemic world.

**KEYWORDS** pandemic, poetry, quarantine, joy, sociality, elegy

## Introduction

In January, my best friend coaxed my clawed hands from the medicine cabinet. In February, I met my partner; January felt far away, a piece of some remote past. In March, the world ended. April is lonely.<sup>1</sup>

So many of my students begin their papers with “Since the beginning of time,” yet here we are, seeing a moment where time truly seems to be at a new beginning; or, at least a form of restarting something. Time is never constant or consistent, but always perches, waiting for its moment. Writing this in November, nearly nine months since the fullness of the pandemic hit the United States in March, it seems that we have all lived a variety of lifetimes. Those of baking bread; those of unknowing; those of warm summer; those of panic; those dictated entirely by Zoom.

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< [https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/IMG\\_6390-Frank-Karioris.jpeg](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/IMG_6390-Frank-Karioris.jpeg) >

Figure 1: Nightscape of East Liberty, Pittsburgh. Photo by author.

someday, we will remember the day we walked along the prom at the very beginning  
of a pandemic, when the world was still motion & stillness had not settled, the  
streets  
not yet sterile & the chairs stacked on tables, dripping from rain not the spilled beer  
of  
students in their first Galway summers<sup>2</sup>

Amongst these lifetimes, there has also been the birthing of a new wave of literary journals dedicated to—and developed within—the pandemic. This essay briefly explores the ways that poetic responses to the pandemic might help guide us away from some of what once was and that might be best left in our oration of elegy, and towards new senses of self and relation as we move forward into a post-pandemic world. Here, quarantine is theorized as a seeding rather than a cutting off, as an opportunity to grow roots. Similarly, rather than seeing elegy as a mode of melancholy, it sees, as many cultures do, the elegiac as infused from its root with senses of joy, and the reality of a tomorrow. During the beginning of the pandemic, people spoke about the ways that nature was regaining, recuperating, and finding new ways to kind of come back to life; here the focus is on the recuperation of people, their spirit, and their relations.

The essay utilizes pieces from a variety of literary journals and magazines<sup>3</sup> that have either emerged to focus on the pandemic or have released special issues related to the pandemic to begin pushing at the boundaries of what we are working through with the pandemic. The essay builds on my previous research into social relations and worlds,<sup>4</sup> as well as my own practice and learning as a poet. While this quarantine has created so much distance, it can be used as a way to understand the importance of relations between peoples, and new relational possibilities. In this, I hope to showcase the ways that writing is not simply a tool for explaining the current situation, but sets up strong roots for the importance of interrelationality and change as we move forward.

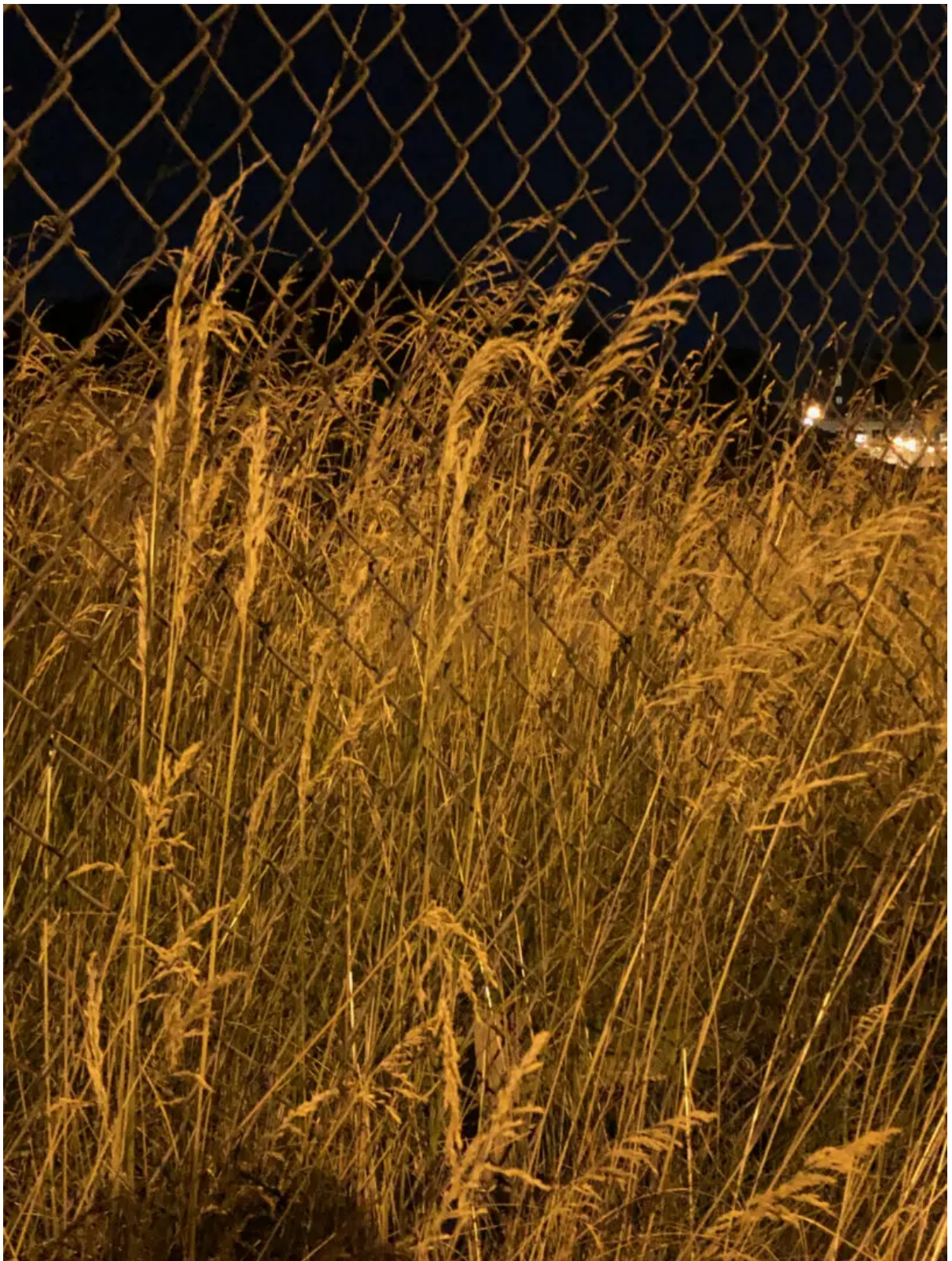
During the pandemic, any number of trends, fads, moments, and trajectories have emerged—and many, then, submerged. With so many people so online, the poetic blossoming has opened up a new capacity for individuals and groups to begin their own literary journal. They can range from formal and having all the accoutrements of a standard literary journal, to being haphazard and vanishing after publishing only a few pieces. In this essay, I cite a number of these journals that have emerged and whose focus is, in part or totality, the pandemic itself and our responses. In this, these journals build off of a long-existing online space for literary examination.

Relatedly, what we have seen is that, on the whole, during the pandemic, people are reading more.<sup>5</sup> While there are not figures related specifically to poetry, it is notable that a poetry book (Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb*)<sup>6</sup> topped the *Publisher's Weekly* chart for multiple weeks in 2021.<sup>7</sup> This is beyond uncommon and speaks to the way that poetry has been taken up during this period.

Lines of poetry from these new online poetry journals are interspersed throughout. Rather than examples for analysis, they are there as the scaffolding of the essay proper; they are a method of creating a world in the essay itself.

## Rooting and Relations





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Figure 2. Long-grass blowing in wind against fence. Photo by author.

As we think back through how we have used our time of late—whether we call it quarantine, pandemic, or just 2020—we will have to begin working through what it was that we used it for. What, exactly, was it? But it is not simply what we made that is of consideration, but the simple fact that time itself bent and blew over in the breeze. We can begin to think about this time, following Jack Halberstam, describing queer, as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices.”<sup>8</sup> While I imagine they hadn’t meant it for quite this purpose, I think it’d also be hard to argue that those words don’t describe the state of our time and world over the past months.

Amid the starkness of masks somewhere on the outside

beyond the trees and unused road,

with yeast, godlike particles,

I plough fresh tracks in flour,

pour out warmth in water.

I live a new innocence<sup>9</sup>

Rather than seeing quarantine and the act of quarantining as ineffectively the always-already negative, I want to have us—using the tools of the trade of creative writing—see it as a space of dormant rooting. In speaking about nature and people amidst it, Wendell Berry notes the pleasures to be found in simply coming into conversation with the landscape. “Such pleasure as there is, is here, now. Take pleasure as it comes.”<sup>10</sup> The land and seeds and the bees that pollinate recognize the importance of moments of stillness, moments of fallow. One might suggest a comparison to Noah and the flood, and the way that the ark represents a quarantining built on seeding and the what-comes-next, rather than what is lost. What might it be to see this period as such a time for all of us?

did you know that many of the ornamental features of our favorite plants—

variegated leaves, vibrant colors, a pleasant and

dramatic curl—are the result of viral

infections?<sup>11</sup>

This is not to omit or make light of the seriousness of the situation. We have seen poverty and unemployment skyrocket, and death is not a metaphor but a reality for many—including my dear friend Walter. If “Hell is a place on earth . . . [and] Heaven is a place in your head”<sup>12</sup> then we must continue the work of living amidst tragedy, grief, and a world full of struggle. As we write tomorrows, we should speak the elegies of today and yesterday. It is in this intertwining that this article pushes; the space where elegy is necessary, and where we must work to find joys—new and old—where we may.

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Figure 3. Beautiful bird / no longer for flight. Photo by author.

For our world is fraught with carelessness. Long before the pandemic “care services had already been slashed and priced out of reach for many of the elderly and disabled . . . homelessness had been on the rise for years, and increasing numbers of schools had begun dealing with pupil hunger.”<sup>13</sup> *The Care Manifesto* continues, “Being cosmopolitan means being at ease with strangeness; knowing that we have no choice but to live with difference, whatever differences come to matter in specific times and places.”<sup>14</sup> The manifesto lays out many of the issues that predate COVID-19, as well as how we must continue past these towards a tomorrow.

At the heart of it is the notion that togetherness, rather than disconnection or individualism, is at the heart of what will bring us out the other side. Not only will it break us of the moribundness of COVID, but that of neoliberalism’s entrenchment of selfishness and uniformity of mind. Here, again, creativity strings out not from the singular individual, but from the gasping voices of community.

In the same way that Ross Gay speaks to how looking for delight “occasioned a kind of delight radar . . . [or] delight muscle”<sup>15</sup> we need to look towards delight—even when it is combined with fraught as a delightful dilemma. Poetry opens up avenues for challenging singularity—of emotion, of community, of love, of person—and allows us to come undone without splintering.

isn’t grief a form of love

pretend i am a parcel

pretend i am a splint undone—

a border underexposed with people,<sup>16</sup>

To continue our metaphor together, we must be a tree whose leaves are multitude—of shape, color, form, fit, style, and love. As seasons change into winter, the trees shed their leaves; yet they do not lose who and what they are, nor do the leaves disappear. Trees do not weep for the loss of their leaves. While they may take moments of reflection to honor the leaves now gone, this is a moment for understanding and reflection on the season, an elegy to those who have come and being together with what will come. They push beyond the specific iteration towards one that is not tied to the branch until it rots where it stands. We need to “foster connections between fractured insurgencies” that allow us to see the leaves, branches, bodies, and roots in connectivity with all those around them so as to refuse singular suggestions of the local.<sup>17</sup>





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Figure 4. Pine and cones on cool fall day, Indianapolis. Photo by author.

I find myself gulping for air and digging fingers into her roots

Watching as a weird miracle vastly undoes us

I see the virus in the ground

showing what was

tangled in the ceiling

now in constant collapse

perfectly messy like

slowdowned hearts left beating at parties, and quiet shoes left at the poetry slams  
and sex wrapping itself

up<sup>18</sup>

Scholars and writers of ecology have known for an extended period of time that our planet is not bounded to the fate which human action might seek to hold it to. "The wild will rescue life on earth, if anything does, because nothing else can."<sup>19</sup> The soil knows what nutrients it needs, and shares with those all around it. As with the trees, so too with our social worlds. All the outpouring of writing should be a beacon to the fact that once, when the world has become safe(r) again, we meet out on front porch steps, or in classrooms, or on rooftops, we will be there together.

We buy things to keep us moving ,

isn't that what WE're told

to do?            Now that you're here

we might find another activity—

or, more, maybe we will speak to

each other like life was meaningful

& we meant something, one another.<sup>20</sup>

As Jodi Dean concludes their recent book *Comrades* by saying, while comrades (and therefore camaraderie) are not a magical solution to all the problems of the world, "it is the only form [of relation] through which these problems might be solved."<sup>21</sup> It has been a long-standing contention that our relation to social lives and social relations is deeply inflicted by heteronormative constraints<sup>22</sup>—in other words, too many people deprioritize their friends over romantic relations.

The quarantine has shone light on these relations between us, and the ways that poetry—amongst art writ large—is a media born of danger, challenge, and addressing those matters which are common to all of us. This is what Camus affirms when they say that “We resemble each other through what we see together, the things we suffer through together. Dreams change according to the person, but the reality of this world is our common ground.”<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion



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Figure 5. When stars fall; Enright Parklet, Pittsburgh. Photo by author.



























All of this essay has been an experiment in what hope and joy can and has done. The argument, if there is one, is that we need joy more than ever; but more than that, we need people. We need shared lives, shared loves, worlds that are not disposed of when they are difficult. For, as much as the poetry coming out during the pandemic has focused on all the struggles we are facing, and done so in tenors of elegy, the practice of putting them into the world is demonstration that there is some semblance of hope, of community, and of roots which we all are drawing upon.

We can both let the light in  
Embrace and be done with it.  
Develop our immunity  
To fear.<sup>24</sup>

Like so many things, many of these journals will be of their time; this is no worse than period pieces or rereading our old letters to now-former lovers. For some, like *infection house*, this time has already come. Writing—boldly and defiantly—though does not age. I have found repeated solace in the words of poets during the pandemic. They have reminded me, as Ferlinghetti says: “Poetry is not a sedentary occupation, not a ‘take your seat’ practice. Stand up and let them have it.”<sup>25</sup> Rather than “return to normal” as some are calling for, let us take this poetry—and the journals that house them—as first iterations of new growth from the forest floor, as an opportunity to break away from our rotting and towards a growth that is contingent and reliant on community, collaboration, and creativity. A move towards joy—a joy together, exuberant, and incorporating elegy. Let these virtues grow forth in all the tomorrows coming.

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## 2013—East by Eastwest: Cultural Studies' Route to Eastern Europe

by Karel Šima, Ondřej Daniel and Tomáš Kavka | Years in Cultural Studies,  
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**ABSTRACT** In Eastern Europe, which is the focus of our study, different national scholarly traditions assigned their own place to the study of culture. Although the influence of the *kulturologia* ("culturology") schools installed at Russian universities in the 1980s radiated out into Eastern European countries, local academic communities dictated the approach to the study of popular culture. While the Polish field of *kulturoznawstwo* was propelled by internal forces from the early 1970s onwards, in Czechoslovakia, *kulturologie* emerged as a new discipline around the fall of the Communist regime. Even so, it failed to take off and by 2012 had vanished completely from the Czech Republic. Central European countries were also affected by the German academic tradition of *Kulturwissenschaften* with its emphasis on philosophy and aesthetics. Our inquiry highlights the first international conference on cultural studies in the Czech Republic in 2013. It was during this event that a group of new postdocs from Charles University, including ourselves, raised the topic of changes in Eastern European popular culture due to the political transformation in 1989. This group had also arranged for Ann Gray, the final director of the UK Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) to give a keynote address at the conference, a gesture that clearly linked the CCCS with the group's own Centre for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPK) established three years earlier. From the outset, CSPK's organizers aimed to promote the Anglo-American tradition of cultural studies both in the academy and among the general public. At the same time, they sought to retain their independence from academic structures and funding systems that might restrict their political activism.

**KEYWORDS** cultural studies, post-socialism, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Centre for the Study of Popular Culture, Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Yugoslavia

Cultural studies has now spread worldwide as both an academic discipline and a general intellectual approach. A historical analysis, however, reveals the very diverse trajectories of this field of study outside the English-speaking world. Depending on national and regional academic traditions, the study of popular culture was incorporated into different disciplinary frameworks. In this essay, we first sketch the varied paths that the study of popular culture took in Eastern Europe. We will demonstrate how political and societal context can play a crucial role for the reflection and adaptation of cultural studies. While the academic reception of the approach represented by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was significantly delayed and problematic in Eastern Europe, the study of what was called the science of culture or culturology remained important in some of these countries. In others, ethnology, social and cultural

anthropology, cultural sociology, media studies, literary studies, and cultural history assumed responsibility for many of the research themes and questions addressed by Anglo-American cultural studies. Finally, in the last part of this study, we show an example of Czech cultural studies history over the last two decades, when a new generation of scholars struggled to overcome the post-socialist context that divided students of cultural studies across both national and disciplinary borders. We highlight 2013 as the year when the first international conference on cultural studies in the region was held in Prague because it marked the link to the already non-existent Birmingham Centre and a new shift towards networking and interconnecting scholars in cultural studies both within Eastern Europe and with the European academic world in general.

## The Legacy of East European *Culturologia*

To contextualize the entering of Anglo-American cultural studies into Eastern European academic environment, we have to sketch out different legacies of the study of popular culture in this part of the world first. Even if national scholarly communities in Eastern Europe had their own approaches to the study of cultures, some countries shared a tradition of “a science of culture” that covered partly the themes approached by the Anglo-American cultural studies. Soviet schools of *kulturologia*, of which the best known was probably the Tartu-Moscow semiotics school established by Jurij Lotman and Boris Uspenskij, were installed at Russian universities in the 1980s and evolved into a broad but internationally isolated discipline in the 1990s. With its methodology based on a holistic theory and history of all culture with a strong structuralist background, this discipline was a long way from Anglo-American cultural studies. According to Maxim Monin, *kulturologia* and “Western” cultural studies were very distant paradigms because they were rooted in incompatible understandings of the relationship between culture and power.<sup>1</sup> While Western scholars saw culture as a field where power was rehearsed and exercised, Russian cultural theorists were inclined to view it as an autonomous sphere for the free and authentic expression of personal creativity. Monin points out that no Russian school would have accepted the Barthian death of the author. Moreover, since Russian culturologists focused on escaping the official Marxist-Leninist ideology, they did not fully understand Western criticisms of capitalist bourgeois culture. In contrast to the early CCCS’ engagement with analytical Marxism and later reconceptualization of Gramscian legacy by Stuart Hall in 1980s, Soviet “science on culture” sought to get over the Marxist-Leninist vocabulary with its all-encompassing subordination of culture to the Communist Party’s politics and thus to depoliticize the sphere of culture. In what are probably the best known examples of Soviet theories of culture – by Mikhail Bakhtin and by Jury Lotman—we hardly find any link to the political dimension of culture, or even to Marxist concepts. For both, the culture was an autopoietic system which was based on the dialogical principle of internal and external tendencies.

While the Russian *kulturologia* approach influenced other Eastern European countries, it was their own academic traditions that ultimately shaped their treatment of the study of culture. The Polish field of *kulturoznawstwo* had long been driven by cultural sociology, an influence that peaked in the 1960s when Zygmunt Bauman devised a new Marxist theory of

cultural practice that was inspired by Antonio Gramsci and coincided with the rise of cultural Marxism in the West.<sup>2</sup> This scholarly milieu gave rise to gradual establishment of the discipline *kulturoznawstwo* ("cultural studies") in the following decades. Grzegorz Dziamski has identified three generations of this Polish school.<sup>3</sup> The first wave consisted of the founding fathers. Stanisław Pietraszko established the first department of cultural studies at University of Wrocław in 1972. Jerzy Kmita, who was the director of the Institute of Cultural Studies in Poznań (established in 1976), sought to develop this scientific discipline based on a universalist theory of the humanities in the 1970s and 1980s. With this approach, the first generation was successful in setting up the academic space for the cultural studies within late socialist Poland. In contrast, the second generation, which benefited from the new possibilities after the fall of communist regime, saw *kulturoznawstwo* as more of an interdisciplinary field that reflected the postmodern turn of the 1990s. Authors such as Wojciech Burszta and Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska opened the debate about the new position of *kulturoznawstwo* in the response to the cultural and other "turns" in humanities.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the third generation of the 2010s questioned the ambiguous relationship of *kulturoznawstwo* to the political engagement of the last decade. Not surprisingly, the British tradition of CCCS played an important role in this critique. Arkadiusz Nyzio argued that one reason for CCCS's delayed reception in Poland was the prevailing "fear of politics" not only in the academy but also in public debates more generally.<sup>5</sup> Although the academic journal *Kultura Popularna* had been published since 2002, an anthology of CCCS texts did not appear in Polish until 2012.<sup>6</sup> In sum, even if the Polish variant of cultural studies has been established at universities and research institutes as a vital discipline it has just very scarcely reflected the political dimension of cultural studies and especially the Marxist debates within Western cultural studies until the recent decade.

In Czechoslovakia, *kulturologie* emerged as an academic field around the fall of the Communist regime, but it failed to advance over the next two decades. Scholars in the Department of Cultural Theory at Charles University in Prague, the only school devoted to *kulturologie* in Czechia, adopted a framework that reflected a rather anthropological notion of culture in the tradition of Leslie White. This Czech *kulturologie* aspired to be a unifying science of culture that would integrate biocultural explanations, a sociological model of sociocultural systems, and psychocultural concepts.<sup>7</sup> While the sociological dimension of this complex schema included a version of cultural studies ("*kulturní studia*") that was used to research subcultures and countercultures, there was a conspicuous lack of reference to CCCS authors. Ultimately, almost all trace of this *kulturologie* approach would vanish from the Czech Republic with the closure of the Charles University department in 2012; only the periodical that the department established, *Journal of Culture*, survives today. In the Slovak Republic, on the other hand, two *kulturológia* departments remained active until 2020, when the school at Comenius University in Bratislava was shut down. The other department at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra has redirected its curriculum and research to the history, philosophy, management, and performance of the creative arts.

## Eastern Inspirations across Disciplines



Nevertheless, themes and approaches of cultural studies have been much vividly reflected beyond the narrow borders of the *culturologia* discipline—in ethnology, cultural anthropology, history, and sociology in Eastern Europe. The cultural research tradition pioneered in Poland by Florian Znaniecki and developed by his compatriot Zygmunt Bauman found echoes in the post-socialist period in a discipline of ethnology. Starting in the 1990s, Polish ethnologists like Michał Buchowski showed a deep interest in the current local context of economic, political, social, and cultural transformations. Buchowski conducted fieldwork in rural locations in western Poland and linked this cultural research to a class-based analysis; the goal here was to capture a process of major asset transfer that was seen as extraordinary by scholars and insiders alike.<sup>8</sup> Buchowski brought the same anthropological approach to the post-socialist period to his later collaborations with many Czech and Slovak ethnologists (for example, Zdeněk Uherek, Alexandra Bitúšiková, and Hana Červinková), which became key references for any cultural research in the region in this era.<sup>9</sup> This disciplinary shift in cultural studies from sociology to ethnography also broadly corresponded with one happening in another nation—Croatia.

The Croatian discourse about post-socialist culture also drew on a strong local academic tradition, this time arising from the Yugoslav sociology of the 1970s and 1980s. In Croatia, which profited from its position between the Cold War blocs, cultural inquiries benefited especially from the relative openness to unorthodox forms of Marxism and the early translation and engagement with major CCCS authors and commentaries. In the 1970s, authors like Andrei Simić and Radomir Konstantinović probed the cultural realities of the rather abrupt urbanization process across Yugoslavia.<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1980s, the emphasis had shifted to cultural anthropology as prominent critics like Ivan Čolović launched an analysis of Serbian nationalist campaigns based on Barthian semiotics.<sup>11</sup> During the wars after the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Belgrade-based Čolović's approach was taken up by a new generation of Zagreb-based ethnologists. Their culture-based readings of the escalation of interethnic conflict into the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) produced studies that became internationally renowned.<sup>12</sup>

This new wave of Croatian ethnologists, including women researchers such as Lada Čale Feldman, Ines Prica, and Reana Senjković at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (IEF) in Zagreb, created seminal works of war anthropology. Their goal was to reflect the experience of individuals caught up in the war.<sup>13</sup> In the words of Maja Povrzanović Frykman, these texts aimed to analyze “cultural processes in the chaos of war,” and their focus on the impact on everyday life provided abundant input.<sup>14</sup> The themes of these studies included the ethnicization of football match rivalries, the renaming of public spaces once dedicated to socialist heroes for figures from ancient Croatian history, the graffiti and iconography of soldiers and military volunteers, and the ethnography of anti-war protests. These cathartic texts by intellectuals trapped in difficult conditions recalled the efforts of another resilient generation that had attempted to deconstruct local culture in Austria in the 1970s and 1980s, in that case through creative works. However in contrast with Austrian writers like Elfriede Jelinek and Peter Handke or filmmakers like Ulrich Seidl or Michael Haneke, the Croatian war ethnologists did not simply oppose the dominant narratives by rejecting them altogether. Instead their strength lay in their quest to expose and explain the forces that had driven the inhabitants of a culturally advanced country into the barbarism of war.

In neighboring Slovenia, cultural studies drew on still different traditions.<sup>15</sup> One of them was Lacanian psychoanalysis whose champion Slavoj Žižek became a global superstar. Another was phenomenology, and a third approach, represented by Peter Stanković and Mitja Velikonja, who both taught in the University of Ljubljana's social science faculty (*Fakulteta za družebne vede*, FDV), reflected CCCS and its interest in subcultures. In Slovenia as elsewhere, the punk subculture became a research focus and a model for similar inquiries into alternative lifestyle practices. Subcultures were, however, not the only target of CCCS-inspired studies. Other topics included the Slovene "neurosis" over European Union accession in 2004<sup>16</sup> and the nostalgia across former Yugoslav states for the dissolved socialist federation.<sup>17</sup> Around a decade later, the interest in combining cultural studies with Yugoslav-specific historical research bore fruit in the town of Pula in the Croatian part of Istria, a region united by its history of anti-fascist struggles. It was there that Igor Duda, Lada Duraković, Boris Koroman, and Andrea Matošević founded the Centre for Cultural and Historical Research of Socialism (CKPIS) at Juraj Dobrila University in 2012.<sup>18</sup> Just two years earlier in the Serbian town of Niš in the southeast of the former Yugoslavia, cultural sociologist Predrag Cvetičanin had established the Center for Empirical Cultural Studies of South-East Europe (CECS). Where his Slovene peers reflected on their punk experience, Predrag Cvetičanin examined his own postpunk one though his research owed less to CCCS models than to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>19</sup> These different approaches to cultural studies across the former Yugoslav states were reflected in the 2017 anthology *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (Post)Socialism and Its Other*.<sup>20</sup> Among other things, this volume confirmed that the scholarship arising from the former socialist federation had implications well beyond its one-time borders.

Nor can we overlook the Hungarian academic traditions that directly impacted on cultural studies in the region. Several Hungarian applications of cultural studies aligned with trends in scholarship in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This was particularly true of the work of László Kürti, who documented the Far Right mobilization of subculture groups in the last days of state socialism and its immediate aftermath.<sup>21</sup> Both Hungarian and Czechoslovak researchers emphasized the role of popular and subcultural music scenes; in the Hungarian context, Anna Szemere's extensive work on these themes was especially notable.<sup>22</sup> A Marxism-inspired approach to culture also animated the research of Judit Bodnár and Krisztina Feherváry, who both examined the material culture of post-socialist elites.<sup>23</sup> The pairing of cultural studies with contemporary history was, thus, particularly productive in Hungary. The collection *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies* (2011) also influenced developments across the border; a review of the book appeared in the first volume published by the Centre for the Study of Popular Culture.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, with the notable exception of the former Yugoslavia, the reception of Anglo-American cultural studies was both delayed and controversial across the states of Eastern Europe. While the academic embrace of Westernization brought significant changes to the social sciences and humanities in the region in the 1990s, Western-style cultural studies was excluded or remained marginal. This was most likely because of the discipline's explicitly political engagement and especially its appeal to Marxist concepts and language, which challenged the post-socialist anti-communist comfort levels. Any version of Marxism was deemed suspicious and conflated with the rigidity of late socialist Marxist-

Leninist ideology. In Poland and Russia, the science of culture had arisen to oppose the official ideology and scholarship of the 1970s, and its scholars like Bakhtin and Lotman had cultivated their own universal theoretical frameworks. For their Czech and Slovak counterparts, the local institutionalization of a discipline with Marxist concepts at its core was simply not conceivable. In the former Yugoslavia, in contrast, scholars could connect more easily with the local variant of unorthodox Marxism, and their work also benefited from a relative openness to global developments in cultural theory.

## Belated Journey to Cultural Studies in Czechia

Scholars who had spent time at universities in the West were the pioneers of cultural studies in the Czech Republic. In 2004, a special issue of *Czech Sociological Review* dedicated to the links between culturology, the sociology of culture, and cultural studies published the first Czech-language articles about CCCS cultural studies.<sup>25</sup> This issue included a study by Jiřina Šmejkalová, a literary historian of Czech origin at the University of Lincoln, who introduced Anglo-American cultural studies approaches to the Czech-speaking audience. This article described the disciplinary turn worldwide from the sociology of culture to cultural studies and noted that in studies of Eastern Europe, this discursive shift had not yet been realized. The trouble, Šmejkalová claimed, was that cultural studies was rooted in the same ideas that had prompted unsuccessful attempts at communist utopias in the region; these Marxism-influenced analyses seemed naive and unacceptable in the Czech post-socialist context. Czech cultural studies, she wrote, should therefore focus instead on the transformation of social life and the cultural sphere under the state socialist regime.<sup>26</sup> This issue of *Czech Sociological Review* that marked the first encounters with cultural studies within Czech humanities also referred to *kultúrální studia*, a term newly defined in this context by sociologist Miroslav Petrusek.<sup>27</sup>

Even if mostly unrelated to this debate in sociology, the same term would appear two years later in the title of the Czech translation of *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies* by Chris Barker.<sup>28</sup> The main instigator of the translation was Irena Reifová, a media theorist in the social science faculty at Charles University in Prague. Drawing on her experience as a researcher of contemporary media and particularly television content in the United Kingdom and Germany, she introduced diverse cultural analyses in her seminar. Reifová examined the role of ideology in Czech television series, documentaries, and reality shows, documenting specific national expressions of global media trends.<sup>29</sup>

Media studies and journalism-based approaches not only helped establish cultural studies in Prague-based faculties; they were also instrumental to the discipline's placement on university curricula across the country where the translated Barker's dictionary found a new audience. At Palacký University in Olomouc, the focus on journalism and textual analysis led to the creation of an MA program in cultural studies in the journalism school of the faculty of arts in 2011. The turn to cultural studies, thus, changed the methodology of journalism training. At the same time, it also fostered pioneering works of comics studies by Martin Foret and others<sup>30</sup> and of fan studies by Iveta Jansová later.<sup>31</sup> The Olomouc school was the first Czech academic department to support a large number of MA and

PhD theses devoted to Anglo-American media and theory and content as well. Around 2010, enthusiastic students in this new program also began publishing the online magazine *Konstrukt*, which viewed ongoing public controversies through a cultural studies lens. Unfortunately this publication only survived two years.<sup>32</sup>

A crucial cause of the Czech institutionalization of cultural studies was the work of literary theorists in the faculty of arts at Charles University. Starting in 2005, Petr A. Bílek hosted a seminar in the faculty on topics including pulp literature and the opposition between art and popular culture. Bílek, who had spent some time as a visiting professor in the United States,<sup>33</sup> drew on literary theory and US studies of popular culture to analyze the narratives of contemporary Czech culture. He also produced a Czech translation of John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* in 2017.<sup>34</sup> His seminars were the starting place of many of the studies later collected in two volumes about popular culture under Czechoslovak state socialism.<sup>35</sup> Bílek went on to found a second Czech MA program in cultural studies; its base was at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice.

Finally, the academic interest in Czech subcultures gained important insights from British CCCS tradition. Starting in the 1990s, research on political extremism comprised both studies on punk-anarchist and far right-skinhead scenes. In this context the department of political science at Masaryk University in Brno produced several important scholarly publications under the leadership of Miroslav Mareš.<sup>36</sup> However, the paradigm of political extremism rooted in German political science (e.g., Uwe Backes' *Extremismustheorie*) narrowed the scope of research questions about the position and role of subcultures in society. Recent political studies on subcultures criticized these limits—among others—with references to the CCCS tradition of subcultural studies.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the research on subcultures has been scattered among anthropological and sociological departments at Czech universities. One of the first collection of essays that reflected British debate on subcultures and postsubcultures was published by Marta Kolářová in 2011,<sup>38</sup> and Hedvika Novotná and Martin Heřmanský offered important insights into postsocialist subcultures.<sup>39</sup>

All of these academic efforts reflecting themes and concepts of Western cultural studies occurred independently during the 2000s with little or no common ground. By the end of this decade several young PhD students (including authors of this essay) came to the conclusion that there is a need to network these efforts and to bring the neglected part of the legacy of CCCS back into debate. Conceived as a grassroots organization that would shift between cultural theory and practice, the Centre for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPK) was established as a non-governmental organization in 2009. In their manifesto, its members wrote that popular culture deserved interdisciplinary analyses that would prompt more intense self-reflection in Czech society. Nevertheless, such efforts were all too rare. Popular culture was highly relevant politically, and there was a need to engage social scientists, students, journalists, and the general public in debate and collaboration on the contentious issues it raised.<sup>40</sup> The founders of the CSPK had background in modern and contemporary history and were conscious of the near absence of interdisciplinary approaches in their own discipline. It was for this reason that they directed their message at such a broad sweep of stakeholders. The center promoted diverse approaches that included academic standpoints often based on the CCCS tradition or Bourdieu's cultural

sociology, but they also addressed the public outside the academy. One topic that resonated widely and reflected the CCCS influence was subcultures and alternative scenes in general.

To attract the attention of the academic community, CSPK organized the first Czech conference on popular culture in 2011. The invitees were chosen to reflect diverse approaches to popular culture. Buoyed by this event's success, the organizers moved on to the next milestone for Czech cultural studies: to internationalize the scope within the postsocialist Eastern Europe. They organized a Central and Eastern European conference on the theme of changes in popular culture based on the political transformation after 1989/1990. This conference took place in 2013 in Prague and marked the very moment of crossing both different disciplinary approaches and East-West borderlines.<sup>41</sup> Hoping to bridge the gap between Eastern European and Anglo-American approaches, the group invited Ann Gray, the last director of CCCS before its closure, to give a keynote address. In this way, the symbolic line between CCCS and CSPK was indicated. A second keynote came from Eric Gordy, a British expat and scholar of Southeastern European popular culture. As the first international conference in Eastern Europe to explicitly address the academic debate about applying Anglo-American cultural studies to the region and its recent history, it provided a platform for first debates overcoming national and disciplinary borders.

The conference that took place in Prague city center at National Museum, Ethnographical Museum – Musaion also revealed many new topics within regional cultural studies and so validated the thesis that this research framework could be productive outside its original Anglo-American context. As such, it affirmed that cultural studies was slowly but surely taking hold in this region and suggested some of its main themes and approaches. Among these research areas were media analysis, memory studies, youth studies, and especially subcultures and popular music scenes. The names of panels can reveal the breadth of the event, still focusing on popular culture in the given region and historical context: Ethnography of Post-Socialism, Memories and Imagination of Post-Socialism, Screens of Post-Socialism, Gendered Post-Socialism, To be Young in Post-Socialism, Soundtrack of Post-Socialism, and two panels on Post-Socialist Subcultures. Thematically, the papers comprised topics as gender and sexuality, comics and youth magazines, nationalism and national stereotypes, music, gastronomy, subcultures, and violence, which mirrored the debates about popular culture in the postsocialist context of this time period. Outcomes of the event included a collective monograph, *Popular Culture and Subcultures of Czech Post-Socialism: Listening to the Wind of Change*, and a special issue, "Popular Culture and Post-Socialist Societies in East-Central and South Eastern Europe," of the academic journal *Media Studies*.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the conference integrated CSPK into a network of like-minded researchers in the region from Baltics to Austria to Bulgaria. It launched a line of similar events and international collaborations in which CSPK was a key initiator and facilitator. In the years since, the center has organized three international conferences on topics including East–West encounters, the rural–urban divide and the nature of the "mainstream" in the Eastern European popular culture. In 2017, CSPK was also one of the coorganizers of the European Popular Culture Association's annual conference, which brought nearly one hundred popular culture scholars from around the world to Prague. At a local level, the center's ten annual series of public lectures have introduced the public to

cultural studies and also nurtured student interest in the field. So far, CSPK's publications include various edited volumes and special issues of academic journals,<sup>43</sup> and its members convey its mission in their many media appearances.



## Conclusion

In this study, we tried to excavate the history of Czech cultural studies through a survey of the situation in other Eastern European countries. We are aware that a detailed overview of all different attempts to engage with the broad and manifold legacy of cultural studies in Eastern Europe would need much more space. We have chosen this approach so as to indicate the barriers that conditions in post-socialist Europe imposed on the discipline's trajectory. In most of these countries, exchanges with the West were restricted by the Iron Curtain. In some cases, a strong domestic tradition of culturology or the science of culture evolved. However, even in the 1990s, Anglo-American cultural studies only made limited inroads. This was largely due to the discipline's roots in a Western-style Marxism that was at the very least suspicious in the post-socialist context. By the end of the millennium, cultural studies themes and approaches had surfaced in different academic contexts in the region but key scholars in the field were not incorporated into university curricula and publications until as late as the 2000s. It was only when post-socialist societies and academic institutions began critically reassessing not only their communist past but also the anti-communist discourses of the 1980s and 1990s that cultural studies became an invigorating source of debates among a younger generation of scholars. In the Czech context, this led to the creation of an independent network outside the academy that sought to revive the critical intellectual engagement with everyday social struggles as mirrored in popular culture. This network also sought to bring together academics from other Eastern European countries to challenge the hegemonic discourses of the post-socialist era and, at the same time, to open the space for mutual enrichment with the legacy of Western cultural studies.





















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## Article details

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## Review of *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* by Christopher B. Patterson (New York University Press)

by Ian Sinnett | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** In *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games*, Christopher B. Patterson critically analyzes video games through the methodological framework of erotics. In doing so, he provides astute insights into the ways in which video games can work to challenge essentialized narratives and constructions of race while also fostering greater awareness and understanding of one's own place within the larger geopolitical systems of capitalism and empire. Through understanding video gamers as not simply passive receptors of ideology, but rather as active participants in the gameplay experience, he contends that video games create pleasure and other forms of affective engagement through erotic play. Through this erotic play, Patterson argues that "games enact playful protests against the power, identity, and order of information technology" (7).

**KEYWORDS** technology, capitalism, race, video games, global, erotics, empire

*Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games*. By Christopher B. Patterson. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020, 344 pp. (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-4798-9590-8. US List: \$35.00

The critical study of video games has been a flourishing field for some time. While the array of research into video games has been varied and perceptive, much of it focuses on either the supposed totalizing negative effects of games or their universal liberating and educational potentials. However, Christopher B. Patterson's *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* takes an exciting and novel approach by exploring the ways in which video games function between these seemingly disparate poles by analyzing them through the lens of erotics.

Patterson's book is complex yet accessible, serious yet playful, and provides unique insight into how video games operate within the larger realm of global politics, the communities playing them, and the individual gamer. He demonstrates that although "games do not seem ideological . . . their very existence has been conditioned upon the spread of militarized technology, the exploitation of racial and gendered labor hierarchies... and the techno-utopian associations of the digital" (1). However, he also reveals how video

games can offer various ways of challenging hegemonic narratives and discourses. Through analyzing gaming as an erotic act of play, he claims that "games can open us to be something other than what we were told we were. Games can break us, can unravel our presumptions about the world, by making plain our desires, pleasures, and powers within it" (30).

Patterson presents the book in two parts, each consisting of three chapters, bookended by an "Introduction" and "Coda." The two parts, titled "Asiatic" and "Erotic," approach games through these respective frameworks. Furthermore, the format of the book mimics forms of video gameplay by engaging in what Patterson refers to as "loops" reminiscent of the concept of the gameplay loop. For instance, each chapter imitates patterns of gameplay by "ending with reflections on Asia as a construct within the world empire" (31), thus invoking an erotics of the text akin to the erotics of gameplay on which the book focuses.

In the introduction, Patterson discusses the historical and theoretical foundations of video game studies and emphasizes the linkages between information technologies and global capitalist imperialism, referring to IT companies as "corporate harbingers of empire" for which video games act as the "artistic expression" (1). He also outlines his methodologies by focusing on three key theorists: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Concentrating on works from their "last decades," (18) Patterson explains how each scholar shifted their analytical foci from the discursive and ideological to the erotic and the body. He highlights how these theorists' analyses of erotics and the body allowed them to "put trust in the powers of erotics both as a self-liberation and as a means of questioning the wider contexts in which pleasure takes place, including the role that pleasure plays in critique itself" (21). Further, through his framing of erotics, he defines the concept of "the Asiatic," as "a style or form recognized as Asianish but that remains adaptable, fluid, and outside of the authentic/inauthentic binary" (27). This concept of the Asiatic plays a major role throughout the text and informs his analyses of the ways in which video games can challenge normative discourses and essentialized narratives.

Part 1 of the book, titled "Asiatic," analyzes games through this framework of the "Asiatic," and tracks how video games can challenge preconceived notions of identity and racial hierarchies. In chapter one, Patterson explores how the "Asiatic" appears in video games and, specifically, explores how "play-based forms of race" in certain video games (e.g. *Street Fighter*) challenge essentialized constructions of race. He argues that thinking about games as "Asiatic" allows for the "reimagin[ing] of racial boundaries and categories," which has "the potential . . . to revise meanings of race and to disrupt racial hierarchies" (41). In Chapter 2, Patterson continues this line of analysis by looking at the importance of authorship (or "auteurship") to analyze how the cultural background of the author or developer of a game can change its discursive meanings. By extension, he argues that "games can better speak to the complexities of imperial violence, where subversion and resistance often occur within the intricacies of vast and uncentered information networks" (79). In chapter three, Patterson explores how the erotics of digital roleplay (through role-playing games and chat room role-play) allow for the reconceptualization of power dynamics which can "make explicit the transnational power differentials that function as digital utopia's conditions of possibility" (115).



Part 2 of the book, titled “Erotics,” shifts the analytical focus to, as Patterson puts it, analyzing how “playing erotically can itself upend forms of knowledge that go beyond merely exposing the faults of information technology but can show us something greater” (158). Chapter four focuses on bodily posture and the embodiment of the gaming experience. Patterson argues that various emotional and affective experiences in gameplay can create different bodily reactions, and in these bodily reactions the gamer takes different bodily postures. Through these postures, the gamer can come to new understandings of the self and of various sociopolitical conditions. In chapter five, Patterson explores the affective experience of the gameplay loop, largely through the open world first person shooter game series *Farcy*, to argue that certain types of gameplay loop can create a sense of pleasure, and in this pleasure, the learning and experiencing of politics can become pleasurable for the gamer and can “help us fathom how none of us are mere spectators” (231) to various political and militaristic atrocities. In the final chapter, Patterson investigates how the digital interactive experience of map viewing (through *Google Earth* and the computer game *Civilization 4*) can allow for a bird’s-eye view of the geopolitical, and thus provoke further curiosity and subsequent investigation into the history that has contributed to these geographies for the viewer and gamer. This allows for one to be “prompted to discover the truth within these spaces—not the truth of the map but the truth of history, of empire, and of real still-living peoples” (270).

Overall, *Open World Empire* is an exciting and insightful text that offers a unique, critical analysis of video games, and should be of interest to anyone working in the areas of critical game studies, popular culture, American studies, Asian American studies, science and technology studies, queer theory, and erotics.

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## Author Information



### Ian Sinnett

Ian Sinnett is a PhD student in cultural studies at George Mason University. At GMU, his research has ranged from the ethnographic study of subcultural music scenes in Washington, DC to the critical analysis of video games. His primary research areas are popular culture and popular music, the politics of memory, affect theory, and critical video game studies. He holds an MA from Kansas State University, and a BA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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## Article details

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## Review of *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* by Dean Spade (Verso Books)

by Paul Centorame | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* is an accessible guidebook meant to inspire local organizing efforts based in mutual care, generosity, and dependency. By reflecting on contemporary contexts in which people are increasingly individualized and rendered dependent on inadequate government support systems, *Mutual Aid* demonstrates that sharing and cohesion are radical steps toward liberation. On this basis, we are reminded that contemporary social crises can usher in the normalization of interdependent community engagement, inspiring lasting social movements built upon mutual aid.

**KEYWORDS** social movements, solidarity, crisis, mutual aid, pandemic

*Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. By Dean Spade. London: Verso Books, 2020, 128 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-8397-6212-3. CAD List: \$19.95.

*Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* offers current and prospective social movements an accessible guidebook to facilitate much-needed radical organizing tactics in contexts of crisis. *Mutual Aid* is primarily addressed to readers who are interested in developing, engaging with, or improving upon mutual aid organizations in their local communities. Spade's experience as an American lawyer, educator, trans activist, and well-known proponent of mutual aid approaches to social inequity figures centrally in the objectives of his book in a variety of ways. For instance, *Mutual Aid* carefully develops its proposed approach to material urgency such that government social services are not legitimated or held above the capabilities of community-based support systems. In this way, *Mutual Aid* is immediately delivered from a position which does not give credence to the often paternalistic, bureaucratic, and limited nature of expertise-based social assistance initiatives. The book demonstrates that these avenues of support are not only insufficient with respect to their capacity for providing people with what they need to survive, but are also exceedingly involved in creating and exacerbating the very crises which produce precarious living circumstances in the first place. This endeavor of critique is deeply connected to Spade's role as a major advocate for community interdependency movements designed to circumvent, exceed, and problematize welfare support systems.

Spade shows that as a result of the limited nature of current social assistance services, crises like COVID-19 have necessitated a plethora of social movements around the world organized through community interdependency as an essential survival mechanism. By reflecting on the successes of these crisis-driven movements, Spade demonstrates that similar kinds of social organizing can (and must be) be built up in order to achieve truly transformative social change. For instance, by reflecting on the strategies employed by Hong Kong's protest movement in the midst of COVID-19, Spade demonstrates ways in which models of mutual aid have already been successful in forcing government concessions and saving lives in crisis situations. Indeed, we are reminded that the successes of mutual aid can even be dated as far back as the 1780s, at which point Black communities had already begun to provide essential community-provided services for people whom government systems would not support (12). In reflecting on these successes of past and present mutual aid-based social movements, Spade inspires a sense of hope and solidarity for communities most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and other contemporary social crises. Above all, these sections of the book highlight important histories of transformative justice developed through the vital work of racialized women, feminists with disabilities, and other marginalized groups who have radically denounced the restrictive act of collaborating with police and other government agents to advance social progress.

Starting from the premise that periods of crisis and deteriorating neoliberal social assistance mechanisms produce a heightened necessity for collaborative, abolitionist social organizing, Spade develops his pitch for mutual aid in two main parts. Part I explores mutual aid historically and conceptually in order to distinguish it from social supports based in "charity" and other bureaucratized models of assistance, as well as to demonstrate its efficacy in the context of a social rupture. This is achieved through three main assertions in Chapter 1: First, that mutual aid projects directly problematize systemic inequities responsible for depriving people of their basic needs and offer alternative ways to meet those needs based on community support. Second, to the extent that mutual aid movements are chiefly mobilized against a shared reality of inequitable socioeconomic conditions, these movements are typically able to cultivate solidarity regardless of differences in lived experience. Third, mutual aid explicitly rejects the notion that "expertise" is a necessary prerequisite for improving social conditions; in fact, it is typically the presence of lawyers or social workers that will derail social progress in line with individualism, bureaucracy, and passivity. In Chapter 2, Spade demonstrates that features of mutual aid pose a fundamental threat to the status quo of normative social support mechanisms, which are largely facilitated by pathologizing, criminalizing, individualizing, and imposing sole responsibility on those who are most vulnerable. Following this, Chapter 3 emphasizes that periods of disaster are critical points at which government support systems are exposed as insufficient, which offers up a rupture through which existing systems can be replaced with something new. *Mutual Aid* thus inspires action on the grounds that now (more than ever) is the time for social movement toward liberation.

In Part II, Spade helps to guide readers in the direction of effectively organizing impactful mutual aid movements while alleviating common setbacks like burnout, overwork, and lack of motivation. Beginning with Chapter 4, Spade stresses the importance of careful discernment between common principles of "charity" models vis-a-vis those of mutual

aid. That is, it is imperative that members of a mutual aid organization distinguish and oppose practices such as dividing members into “deserving” and “undeserving” camps, taking on paternalistic roles, allowing co-option and corruption from government agents to go unchecked, or collaborating with the further breakdown of public infrastructure. In addition to providing readers with a comprehensive chart to avoid these pitfalls, Spade reassures us that it is not unnatural to be enticed in the direction of hierarchy, greed, and elitism; capitalism has subtly inculcated these values in us. However, mutual aid is meant to instill a new sense of social cohesion based upon flexibility, compassion, and justice—one where decision-making through *consensus* (*not* majority rule) is key.

In Chapter 5, Spade provides a rich collection of charts, schedules, and recommendations designed to assist mutual aid groups in relearning values of social organizing and forgoing values of hierarchy or bureaucracy. These materials include information on organizing effective consensus decision-making, fostering desirable leadership qualities, effectively handling money, alleviating burnout, and dealing with common kinds of group conflict. Being that hierarchy trains us to handle these dilemmas either through submissive avoidance or by imposing a dominating decisiveness over others, this section of *Mutual Aid* does the careful work of assisting readers to engage with conflict through compromise and empathy. Within mutual aid groups, Spade demonstrates that conflict can be reworked into something positive and generative rather than something to be avoided and left to fester. Even despite the toxic effects of contemporary social life on our understanding of conflict resolution, this chapter of *Mutual Aid* reminds readers that carefully executed social justice work can be rooted in joy, connection, mutual learning, and companionship.

In sum, *Mutual Aid* is not only a guidebook for surviving current and future social crises; it offers a means by which social life may be radically transformed toward widespread social equity, cohesion, dignity, and belonging. It is a comprehensive, accessible, and impactful text, which demonstrates that social movements based in interdependency are imperative and particularly conducive to radical social change in contemporary contexts.

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## Author Information



### Paul Centorame

I am a graduate research assistant and MA student in the Socio-Legal Studies program at York University. My academic interests include Foucaultian theory, LGBTQ+ rights, homonationalism, and governmentality. In my current research project, I examine how queer inclusion in Canadian law has discursively rearticulated same-sex relationships in terms of their potential for responsibility, productivity, and respectability. In conversation with other scholars who work at the intersection of governmentality and LGBTQ+ rights, I hypothesize that it is through a legal discourse of “love” that queer rights are constituted such that their very exercise ascertains commitments to care-giving, nation-building, and other elements of the prevailing neoliberal social order.

[View all of Paul Centorame's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## Review of *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the Twenty-First Century* by Alyson K. Spurgas (The Ohio State University Press)

by Sophie Webb | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** In *Diagnosing Desire*, Alyson K. Spurgas examines female sexual dysfunction, specifically low desire in women, and refuses to take anything for granted. One part history of modern sexology and one part feminist critique of the biopolitics engendered by sex research, Spurgas uses anti-racist, queer, disability studies, and trauma-informed theories to argue that the apolitical and atheoretical approach used in much of the modern science of sexuality confines women's sexual desire to a purely receptive model. Spurgas problematizes essentialist, anti-intersectional, and hetero- and cisnormative frameworks through which women's sexual desire has become a problem to be solved through self-improvement and by learning to push through feelings of low desire. Instead, Spurgas offers insights into the lives of women with low desire by attending to their experiences with inequality and trauma, and proposes a new understanding of women's sexuality—and of femininity more generally—based on prudent and critical attention to power.

**KEYWORDS** feminism, disability, gender, biopolitics, sexuality, trauma

*Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the Twenty-First Century*. By Alyson K. Spurgas. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2020. 290 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-8142-5769-2. US List: \$34.95.

Directly countering the essentialist nature of what she calls the “new science of female sexuality,” Alyson K. Spurgas’s *Diagnosing Desire* takes a deeply critical approach to the concept of sexual desire and engages masterfully with intersectional feminist theories and a biopolitical lens. She argues that while the various sexological models that describe women’s desire as fundamentally responsive and receptive are intended to allow sex researchers to *understand* women’s sexuality, they instead *produce* a reductionist, hetero-/cisnormative, and anti-intersectional form of female sexuality that primarily exists as a problem to be solved. Moreover, this “feminized responsive desire framework” manages, regulates, and produces a certain racialized and gendered iteration of female desire which all women are expected to live by. The most pressing issue Spurgas contends with is that “trauma—including banal, everyday, and insidious forms of trauma including but also beyond childhood sexual abuse—has [gone] largely unaccounted” in the

feminized responsive desire framework and in sex researchers' attempts to solve the problem of low female desire (8).

Organizationally, *Diagnosing Desire* is split between historicizing and contextualizing the underlying logics of sex research through close readings of scientific and psychological texts in the first half and a chronicling of feminist engagements with sex research through themes unearthed in Spurgas's interview data in the second half. In chapter one, Spurgas surveys research on female sexuality and conceptions of femininity from the psychoanalytic models of the 1930s to the evolutionary psychological models since the 1990s. She pays special attention to how sexologists' explicitly apolitical and atheoretical research methods work to maintain the misogynistic notion of feminine sexual responsiveness to (cis) men across these analytical models and naturalize gender differences as biological innate. Chapter two is particularly insightful; Spurgas explains how psychophysiological models and gendered diagnoses—like female sexual interest/arousal disorder (FSIAD)—define healthy sex and sexuality according to taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, race, heteronormativity, and cismativity. In doing so, these models ignore the power dynamics and inequalities within these systems of inequality. More succinctly, chapter two highlights one of the book's central arguments: "as these researchers have sought to normalize women's responsive desire, I want to trouble that normalization . . . [Feminized responsive desire] is normal only insofar as gender inequality in sex is normal" (72). Chapter two also elucidates the potential harm that some treatments for low desire can do to women with low desire. Behavioral and mindfulness-based therapies intended to help women ignite their sexual desires may in practice encourage women to "push through" traumatic feelings or even have otherwise undesired sex with their partner in the name of responsiveness and receptivity (97).

Chapters three, four, and five are where Spurgas analyses several recurring themes derived from her interviews, particularly her participants' experiences with sexual difference socialization—or "how we learn to have sex in gendered ways"—and the impact of that socialization on people of diverse race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and class backgrounds (108). Chapter three shifts the book's focus from considering how researchers understand the feminized responsive desire framework to an investigation of how it feels to be a woman-with-low-desire living that framework. Spurgas presents participant after participant who express a great deal of preference for desire to precede physical arousal when having sex and notes that this is particularly salient for women who experienced sexual abuse, a point continued in chapter five. The fourth chapter considers the feminization and biologization of sexual, sensual, and caring work. Here Spurgas investigates the sexual carework that low-desiring women undertake to be both a form of compulsory self-care/self-optimization and as a form of biopolitical population control through which women-with-low desire manage their sexuality for the sake of others. In the fifth chapter, Spurgas contends that many women-with-low-desire "do, in fact, experience sexual desire, just not for the type of sex they are *expected* to have" (186, emphasis in original). She gives the example of BDSM as a space where women-with-low-desire experience profound desire, often the desire to submit, in part because BDSM culture heavily prioritizes consent and so for many of these women the fantasy of being dominated is actually a fantasy about consent and trust (186). As part of a wider desire-trauma matrix, for Spurgas's interview subjects, submitting to a sexual partner they trust—

and thus feeling a sense of control over their domination—can, in a world full of both overt and insidious gendered trauma, be both cathartic and sexy.

Spurgas concludes by rearticulating the potential for harm in apolitical, atheoretical models of receptive sexual desire. These models can harm the women with low desire who they seek to understand by normalizing women's subordination as a natural feature of their supposedly innate receptivity, and by proposing that the solution to low desire will be found in individualized and neoliberal forms of self-improvement. Instead, Spurgas argues for forms of care that attend to the population of women with low desire in radical, communal and trauma-and-critically-informed ways. To that end, *Diagnosing Desire* is not just a book about sexual dysfunction or any specific diagnosis, but is instead a systematic and enlightening exploration of the material-discursive regimes that produce and regulate sexual difference and femininity. Not only a timely and critical contribution to social studies of sexology and trauma, and to feminist science and technology studies more broadly, *Diagnosing Desire* demonstrates how feminist scholars across the disciplinary spectrum can engage in radically empathetic work in an approachable and appealing way.

*Diagnosing Desire* is the 2021 recipient of the Cultural Studies Association *First Book Prize* < <https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/2021-winner1.html> > .

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## Author Information

### Sophie Webb

Sophie Webb is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of California, San Diego, where she specializes in feminist theory. Her research explores the politics of care and conceptions of fairness in scarce medical resource allocation.

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## Review of *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* by Matthew Brim (Duke University Press)

by Adrian Switzer | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** The review focuses on the practical work of *Poor Queer Studies*. Rather than retheorize queer studies from the class perspective of "rich" and "poor," Brim makes a case study of his work as a professor of queer studies at the College of Staten Island (CSI). Insisting on the particularity of his and his students' relationship to queer studies, Brim makes an example of the work they do together in the classroom, and the ways they live their studies on public transit, at home with their families, and in their part-time jobs. This review questions the extent to which poor queer studies differs from the modern university's reduction of all education to career-training. Brim's praxis of poor queer studies is always undertaken with individual students in specific socio-economic circumstances—a particularity that makes it different than market-driven job-training. This review also raises questions about the general applicability of this case study. Would poor queer studies work elsewhere as it does at CSI? Berlant's idea of exemplarity is helpful in answering this question. Unlike examples that confirm a norm, there are examples that change norms. Brim's example of poor queer studies works to exemplarily change what counts as normal. Practically, this means no longer thinking of queer studies as operating without class distinction—and reclaiming part of the work of the discipline from seemingly classless rich queer studies at places like Yale and New York University.

**KEYWORDS** poverty, queer, praxis, university, academia, public education, case study

*Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University.* By Matthew Brim.  
Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2020, 247pp. (paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-4780-0820-0. US List: \$26.95.

In *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University*, Matt Brim makes a case study of his own academic circumstances to exemplify, variously, what queer studies does. Accordingly, *Poor Queer Studies* begins with what Brim terms a "living archive" of the queer work he and his fellow faculty do at the College of Staten Island (CSI) and ends in his Black Gay Male Literature class, where he and his students work to "addres[s] the systematic failure to teach [and learn] black queer reading practices" (160).

Brim's book locates the praxis of queer studies, and, specifically, of poor queer studies, not only in his classroom at CSI—where he serves as a Professor of Queer Studies in the Department of English—but also in the departmental and interdepartmental exchanges

between queer faculty on campus, off-campus on the buses and ferries students ride to commute to Staten Island from Queens or the Bronx, and in the homes of students in Brim's classes. Brim's experience teaching, for example, Lee Edelman's "anti-social" queer theory of the child as "symbol . . . [of] the heterosexualized political project of reproductive futurism" (144) to a room full of women with children, shows poor queer studies to be a matter of learning how to do queer studies in situ. Such sites include in the grocery store where a student works as a bagger, or on the beat in midtown Manhattan where one of Brim's former students works as a police officer; upon running into that student, Brim thinks to himself, "This cop has queer knowledge with him on the job" (113).

Brim deploys the language of "case study," and of "showing" and "exemplifying" poor queer studies to reflect the style and technique of his book. Each chapter of *Poor Queer Studies* shows the titular practice from a slightly different perspective. For example, Chapter Two is bookended by Judith Butler's joke, "I was off to Yale to be a lesbian" (66) and Eve Sedgwick's advice, "you can write your way out of anywhere" (96), to frame Brim's reflections on the "aspirational mood" of queer studies, generally (85). By aspiring to fuller institutional recognition, or higher national ranking, a discipline committed to criticality ends up unthinkingly "believing in" and enforcing class and race hierarchies (75). How unqueer! If there is a unifying principle to the book it is that the work of poor queer studies needs be done in real time and place with real people. He suggests that this entails more robustly understanding the life circumstances of his students. For example, Brim recalls an Asian-American student who seemed to be gender-conforming, and who never "sa[id] anything" in class, who in fact was transgender and "never t[old] [me], their queer studies professor" (21).

By implication, the foil to Brim's argument, rich queer studies students and professors, do not do what he and his students engage in regularly within and outside of their specific classrooms at their particular university. If, as Brim writes, "[i]t's clear that Rich Queer Studies professors and I don't have the same job" (88), then, again by implication, it should be clear that the work he and his students do is markedly different than the non-work professors and students are not doing in such prestigious departments as Yale and NYU. One way of delineating the difference between poor and rich queer studies would be in terms of theory: rich queer studies departments emphasize theory, while poor queer studies cannot help but emphasize practice. Yet, Brim explains that his preference in the book is "not to parse out queer theory from queer studies" (90); rather, Brim "emphasize[s] the personal and institutional class and status divide among those of us working in queer studies" (90).

Brim suggests that the theory/practice dialectic is not particular enough to capture the site-specific class and race politics that operate in Brim's classrooms—and beyond his classrooms—at CSI. Instead, he frames the book through the dialectic of "poor" and "rich." Though among the most "rigid [and] stale" class terms (90), Brim adopts them as sufficiently fine-grained to carry out a place-based, auto-theoretical, problematizing of classism and racism in the academic field of queer studies. As he writes early in the book, poor queer studies "might be understood as an effort to make the comparison between Poor Queer Studies and Rich Queer Studies a bit more odious so that their class- and



status-based incommensurabilities can be exploited rather than invisibilized or naturalized" (88).

That Brim shows what poor queer studies can do by giving examples from his students' part- or full-time workplaces should not mislead the reader—he is well aware of the critiques levelled against the neoliberal academy. Indeed, Brim recognizes the uncomfortable proximity between his own interest in the work of poor queer studies and the goals of today's universities to professionalize all students. Chapter three, "The Queer Career," argues for the working efficacy of poor queer studies. This chapter distinguishes the positive idea of vocational queer studies from the negative critique of contemporary higher education as beholden to capitalist interests, where "'student' has become synonymous with 'consumer' and . . . the student departs an ever-debtor" (102). Undoubtedly, the neoliberalism of the contemporary academy involves far more than the socio-economics of consumerism and debt. Brim's effort to reclaim some of the "terms for thinking about students and/as workers" (102) that have been more and more imperialized by capitalism is admirable. However, that such an effort is required to reclaim "organized labor" to describe what (already) working queer studies students and professors do is a diminishingly small gain—particularly when defined as a matter of "asking how the field [of queer studies] can inform and improve the work lives of . . . students: the sex store employee, social service agency case worker," etc. (105). Brim does not fully account for the difference between a neoliberal-minded administrator's goal to prepare students for the market-determined workforce and a poor queer studies professor's efforts to "improve the work lives . . . of students" (105).

The personal and institutional specificity of the book—again, it is about a particular queer studies professor from Indiana teaching groups of individual queer studies students at CSI, an institution with its own particular history and presence in the field—offsets some of the concern about the neoliberalism of "vocational queer studies." Brim is not training his students to be better—i.e., more efficient and productive—workers in a market-defined, generic sense. Rather, Brim aims to "help students envision possibilities for queering nonqueer careers" in which they already work (117). Brim and his students are not doing the critical, intersectional work of poor queer studies; they demonstrate what such work involves at an underfunded outer-borough public New York City university where in any given class, for example, there will be a number of women raising children while completing their degrees. Doing poor queer studies with these students in the here and now of CSI is different, Brim maintains, than job-training the next-generation late-capitalist workforce.

For all its critical potential, particularism also raises questions of how applicable a place-bound, autobiographical study is to other places and to other people. As readers of Brim's work, and as potential practitioners of poor queer studies in our own given circumstances, we can put the question in terms of exemplarity: are Brim's classes at CSI in some sense exemplary of the important work of poor queer studies? How do we follow Brim's example without obscuring the critical force of his particular place and time? Equally, how do we follow Brim's example without diminishing our own specific criticality? Early in the book, Brim appeals to Lauren Berlant to help think through such questions: "'When it doesn't work to change the conditions of exemplarity . . . something is . . . remanded to banal

particularity. When it does, a personal or collective sensorium shifts'" (Berlant quoted in Brim, 62). An example that conforms to and confirms a norm is little more than another instance of the same. An example that reveals the very conditions of normativity changes both the norm and what it means to be exemplary. In its work of changing the conditions of what exemplary queer studies is and what it does—a change already somewhat affected in the reader's desire to know if that example is an instance of poor or of rich queer studies—Brim's book shifts our personal and collective sense of the discipline itself.

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## Author Information



### Adrian Switzer

Adrian Switzer is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Missouri Kansas City. He is a co-translator of *Parmenides: Cosmos and Being* (2008), and author of *The Events of May 1968: The Art and Philosophy of Revolution* (forthcoming). He has also authored journal articles, book chapters, and review essays on such figures as Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Irigaray, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jean Améry.

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Adrian Switzer, "Review of *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* by Matthew Brim (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 10.2 (2021).

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## Review of *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* by André Brock, Jr. (New York University Press)

by Nora Suren | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** In *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, interdisciplinary scholar André Brock, Jr. offers a timely and powerful examination of Blackness in the digital age. The book centers Black technology use from Black perspectives and investigates the online distribution of Black discourses. In six exploratory chapters, Brock reconceptualizes Black technoculture in a way that corrects deficit models of Black digital practice.

**KEYWORDS** technology, race, Blackness, internet, media discourse, digital media

*Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. By André Brock, Jr. New York: New York University Press, 2020. 288 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781479829965. US List: \$29.00.

André Brock, Jr.'s latest book, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, is an interdisciplinary work offering compelling possibilities for studying Black digital practices and information experiences. Brock connects linguistics, rhetoric, and critical race theory with computer-mediated communication research through the lens of critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to provide a cultural and racial framework for examining technology. He invites researchers to study the intersectionality of race and technology beyond the notions of absence and resistance. Brock writes, "racism is not the sole defining characteristic of Black identity" (x). He wants readers to think through the expressions of joy in everyday life African Americans extol on the internet. In a way, *Distributed Blackness* is a call for joy.

Brock structures *Distributed Blackness* as part of a legacy of Black informational projects such as *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (1936–66). Brock argues that while the *Green Book* imagined the US highway system as a Black technological network to resist white racial violence and hegemony and a guide to safe spaces that would help Black travelers, the internet does not offer the same physical potential for discrimination and anti-Black racism. However, there is still a dire need for "safe spaces" for Black folks seeking information, connecting with others, and expressing themselves online; thus, Brock sets out to answer the critical question: "How, then, do the internet and digital media mediate Blackness?"

One of the most significant things Brock does across this work is to demonstrate how Black folks have always been in online spaces and how they have made the internet a “Black space” while also decentering whiteness as the default internet identity and defying technocultural beliefs of Black primitiveness. In another significant contribution, *Distributed Blackness* recognizes that the libidinal energies of antiblackness and necropolitics drive the political economy of racism mediated through information and communication technologies (ICTs). Brock argues that these libidinal features of Western technoculture must be examined and revised to account for Black culture and digital activity. In doing so, he suggests revisiting Joel Dinerstein’s matrix of six elements that underpin Western technoculture: whiteness, masculinity, religion, progress, modernity, and the future.<sup>1</sup> Since the presumed whiteness of American and Western technical identity that Dinerstein describes cannot account for Blackness and technology, Brock restructures the technocultural matrix to unpack Black digital practice. Brock suggests that six categories constitute the Black technocultural matrix: Blackness, intersectionality, America, invention/style, modernity, and the future. Brock theorizes “a Black cultural relationship with technology, drawing on the Black experience in the West—an experience that is shaped by relationships with whiteness and with technology” (228). The Black digital practice that Brock describes is a sphere for Black life and joy structured against the dominance and control of Black bodies.

Methodology is another significant contribution of this project. Brock uses CTDA, which examines technology use from the perspective of marginalized and underrepresented groups, to form this conceptualization of a Black techno- and cyber-cultural matrix. This method illuminates what the technology is doing and how people understand themselves through their relationship to the technology. Brock also draws together theory on the rhetorics of Black discourse as identity, the metaphysics of Blackness, the libidinal possibilities of Blackness, and Black feminism. Brock’s intersectional methodology can serve as a model for other scholars of ICT. Brock suggests that internet studies would be much more impactful if academics were explicit about the whiteness of the online communities they studied.

Chapter 1 unpacks the uses of CTDA and also the concepts, such as libidinal economy, that underpin the book. This chapter provides a literature review of critical qualitative scholarship examining race, digital media, and technoculture. In this chapter, readers are introduced to the term *libidinal economy*, drawn from the work of Jared Sexton, Fred Moten, and Frank Wilderson. Libidinal economy is a powerful tool to understand Black uses of information technology and to counter rationalistic and modernist IT theories, which contain pejorative beliefs about nonwhite users, leading to either deficit models of technology use or over-celebrating nonwhite resistance skills. Libidinal economy, argues Brock, “provides a path toward conceptualizing Black technology use as a space for mundanity, banality, and the celebration of making it through another day” (10).

Chapters 2 and 3 use CTDA to establish a matrix of Black cyberculture and examine intersections of race and the digital, emphasizing the heterogeneity of Black online existences. In Chapter 2, Brock uses the Blackbird browser as an example to explore how software applications shape Black identity. Shifting to social networking services, Chapter 3 addresses a rarely asked question: “What would a Black online network look like?”

Brock's answer is Black Twitter, which utilizes Black discursive identity to position the service as an emotional construct that focuses on shared pathos and catharsis.

Brock's conceptualization of the libidinal economy is the emphasis of the second half of the book. Chapters 4 and 5 synthesize earlier chapters on Black technoculture into a conceptual framework of Black digital discursive practice. Drawing on Black aesthetics, Chapter 4 theorizes Black digital practice through "ratchetry," a "digital practice born of everyday banal political behavior that is rooted in Black culture and discourse" (126). Brock focuses on the sensuality of Black digital practice stating that Black folks enact their cultural identity online because they find joy in being Black; thus his definition of *ratchetry* in this chapter incorporates a "libidinal component of pleasure" (128). Chapter 5 continues theorizing Black digital practice by delving into online Black respectability, using Ayesha Curry's tweets as a case study. By analyzing the Black audiences' reception, Brock demonstrates that social networking services like Twitter allow Black community members to vocalize a modern politics of respectability via digital means to police the behaviors of Black folks. Chapter 6 furthers the possibility of libidinal economies of information technology to build out a Black technocultural matrix. This final chapter articulates Brock's main argument about Black digital practice as "vitality, energy, and occasionally, joy" (15). To examine how Black people make sense of their existence as users and understand the joy and pleasure in Black digital practice, this chapter places Black folks at the center of ICT use, incorporating libidinal economy for this analysis.

In advocating for more research about the ethos and ideals of Black technoculture, Brock demonstrates how beliefs about Black Americans as deviant versions of white Americans have been transformed by the political and cultural prowess of Black digital practice on social media services, particularly on Twitter. Brock aspires to change the outdated perception that Black Americans have less "civilized" or "sophisticated" online information uses and behaviors. This book's main argument for theorizing Black technoculture should be understood as a corrective to deficit models of Black digital practice. Brock's reimagination of Black technoculture is an invitation to researchers who want to better understand Black digital practice.

## Notes

1. Joel Dinerstein (2006). "Technology and Its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman," *American Quarterly* 58(3): 569–595. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068384> <  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068384>> . 

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## Author Information



Nora Suren



Nora Suren is a third-year PhD student in Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she is studying digital culture and society, as well as race and gender representations online. She is also interested in the history and theory of digital media.

[View all of Nora Suren's articles.](#)

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## Review of *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam* by Evren Savcı (Duke University Press)

by Leelan Farhan | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Evren Savcı's *Queer in Translation* presents an alternative, both in methodology and analysis, to the Orientalist analytical frameworks typical of Western scholars studying queer politics in Middle Eastern regions. Specifically, Savcı analyzes the rise of Turkey's Adalet ve Kalınma Partisi (AKP; in English, the Justice and Development Party) to show how the AKP's increased securitization and oppression of marginalized communities—including, but not limited to, Turkey's LGBTQ community—is the result of the marriage of Islam and neoliberalism. Savcı produces compelling case studies that reveal how Turkey's weaponization of religion, morality, and capitalism serve to secure the nation against dissenting citizens. From the discourse surrounding the complicated murder of a gay Kurdish man, to unlikely solidarities between religious hijabi women and LGBTQ activists, and the public commons that became Gezi Park, Savcı's critical translation methods reveal how the language to construct and resist securitization in Turkey are far more nuanced than simple attribution to solely Islamist extremism or Western neoliberal influence.

**KEYWORDS** politics, gender, queer, sexuality, Islam, Turkey, translation studies

*Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam*. By Evren Savcı. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2021, 248 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1136-1. US List: \$25.95.

Discussions of queer politics in Middle Eastern nations from Western scholars frequently homogenize the region, analyzing Middle Eastern politics and experiences through Orientalist frameworks in direct opposition to Western neoliberalism. In her new book, *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam*, Evren Savcı departs from dominant frameworks of queer politics, using critical translation studies and ethnography to produce a compelling analysis of how neoliberal Islam in Turkey weaponizes religion, morality, and capitalism to secure the nation against “marginal” identities—both queer and otherwise. From the ways in which solidarities between hijabi and LGBTQ activists were forged and broken, to narratives around the death of a Kurdish gay man to the uprising at Gezi Park, Savcı's ethnographic case studies reveal how the language and narratives used to construct and resist securitization in Turkey are neither the sole product of right-wing Islam, nor of neoliberalism. Rather, it is the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's marriage of both ideologies that shaped the current political narratives in Turkey, as well as queer and feminist activists' methods of resistance.



In outlining Turkey's complex history, including its desire to Westernize itself in contrast to the rest of the Middle East, Savcı elucidates how Turkey itself ruptures Orientalist binaries of "West as oppressor" and "East as oppressed" and provides a new perspective against the infantilizing focus on Islamophobia. From its Ottoman history as an imperial and colonizing force against many minority groups such as the Kurdish and Armenian people—which is ongoing to this day—to its Romanizing of the Turkish alphabet, invasion of Syria, and its aspirations to integrate into the European Union, Savcı shows how Turkey's history is deeply intertwined and influenced by Western notions of capitalism, colonization, and neoliberalism, as well as both democratic and right-wing Islam. As such, Turkey's transition from a secular regime, to democratic Islam, to its current right-wing regime cannot be explained by either "colonial mimicry or the frameworks of Islamophobia or homonationalism" (24). This is the crux of Savcı's argument.

To make this argument, each chapter of the book centers around an event or physical space pivotal in Turkish queer activism during the AKP regime from 2001 to present. The book follows a rough chronological outline of the AKP's transition from moderate democratic governance to increasing authoritarianism. In Chapter 1, Savcı describes a unique discourse of queer politics that emerged from the solidarity of Islamic feminists, LGBT, Kurdish, and Armenian activists against the state—a politics of *zulüm* (cruelty). During the AKP's early days, government officials inflamed tensions between secularist LGBT activists and Islamic feminists by frequently pitting them against one another. For example, Savcı shows how the new terms "LGBT rights" and "homophobia" were deliberately employed on national television to place hijabi activists and queer activists in opposition to one another by assuming a universal understanding of these terms. However, rather than focusing on differences in ideology, Savcı shows how all activists and non-profits worked together to vehemently oppose state-sanctioned *zulüm*. As such, this chapter is a testament to how Turkish queer and feminist politics refuse reductive binaries of Western discourse (secular queer politics) versus Eastern discourse (Islamic morals and interpretation), and instead, offer an alternative "space of negotiation" to, as Savcı states, "listen differently" (52).

In Chapter 2, Savcı focuses on the death of a Kurdish gay man, Ahmet Yıldız, and the honor-killing narrative that originated in British newspapers. In analyzing her interview with the sole witness of the crime, Savcı unpacks the honor-killing discourse surrounding Ahmet's death, showing how it proliferated despite a lack of evidence to support such a theory, traveling across the world to become the example of conservative Islam's "resistance to the rule of law" in a country that is becoming "progressive" (54). To do so, Savcı traces the physical and lingual translation of "honor-killing" and "outness" from Western media back to Turkey, contrasting the reductive story told in the media with testimonies from Ahmet, his friends, and the sole witness and second victim of the crime, Darama. Darama's interview with Savcı reveals alternative motives for Ahmet's murder involving political corruption, religious morality, and Darama herself. In light of Darama's testimony, Savcı casts significant doubt upon the honor-killing theory, problematizing narratives of Turkey as a beacon of neoliberal progress in the Middle East.

In addition to investigating the theories behind Ahmet's murder, Savcı discusses an opinion piece written by Ahmet about his coming out as evidence of the complexities of being

"out." Contrary to reductive Western and homonormative notions of "outness" as being something to be proud of, or Arab queer scholars' critique of outness as "white and heteronormative," Savcı's critical translation reveals that Ahmet's story is much more complex. As Savcı highlights, Ahmet was proud to be out, but also sad at the tensions it caused in his familial life, warning others not to come out if they fear the same. In these ways, Savcı's thorough analysis reveals how narratives surrounding Ahmet's death reproduced the neoliberal framing of Western progress (Turkey) versus Eastern backwardness (Kurds), and simplified concepts of "outness" and familial relations according to liberal ideals, all the while diverting attention away from Turkey's ongoing state-sanctioned violence against Kurdish people. Importantly, in analyzing Ahmet's death in its entirety, with all its complex details, *Queer in Translation* itself is a testament to the possibility of "envisioning other ways of understanding his life and death" (79).

In Chapter 3, Savcı discusses state-sanctioned violence against trans women sex workers and challenges the notion currently pervasive in queer studies that hate crime bill advocacy is unequivocally a symptom of homonormativity. Rather than necessarily increasing policing or encouraging the adoption of neoliberal ideals, she argues, hate crime laws potentially force the state to recognize itself and its systems as perpetrators of this violence. Whereas in Western countries like the United States, hate crime bills tabled in favor of the LGBTQ community assume a benevolent protection by police, Savcı's analysis of the AKP government's history makes this point irrelevant in the Turkish activist context. This is because, as her fieldwork with trans women in Turkey shows, the AKP government gradually moved from overt state violence, to fines and urban gentrification and off-loaded physical violence onto "deep citizens" (81). While the AKP government focused on implementing its neoliberal "urban development programs" by fining trans women individually, introducing property titles, and forcing cumbersome mortgages that were sure to be defaulted on, ministers made statements encouraging "honorable citizens" to "shoot a bullet on behalf of the state" (101). Indeed, in both 2006 and 2012, these "deep citizens," as Savcı terms them, violently attacked trans women who refused to leave their gentrifying neighborhoods, and not a single police officer stopped the attacks (101). Thus, Savcı argues, the physical violence against trans women was not replaced; rather, "one was superimposed upon the other" (80) as the government called upon "honorable" citizens to do their dirty work, flipping the Western argument against "hate crimes" on its head (101).

Savcı ends Chapter 3 with the stories of trans women living and working out of a *koli* house (informal brothel) to highlight how "their activism against hate involved imagining a different kind of life altogether *for all*, away from state terror as well as neoliberal precarities" (108, emphasis mine). To quote a trans woman, Esra, "We don't live. We serve states. We serve those who govern, those parliamentarians, those ministers . . . those who exploit us" (106). And as such, Savcı suggests "that the voices of trans women activists to be found in these pages make a case for listening with curiosity to similar demands made elsewhere" (82). With that, Savcı, expertly encapsulates both the complexity and the universality of queer politics in a neoliberal Islamic state, and beyond.

Chapter 4 continues this vein of thought, where Savcı compares the current focus on identity politics and criticism within the queer progressive activism of academia's ivory

towers to the “magical” solidarity that formed in the Gezi Park commons, arguing that the former classes political subjectivity for the purpose of cultural capital. To highlight this classism and exclusionary politics, Savcı discusses academic activists’ negative sentiments towards a woman-only queer bar, Kadinka, due to their constant “fighting” and “sexually aggressive female masculinity” (114). However, Savcı’s analysis reveals that these feelings are largely rooted in stereotypes of lower-class Turkish masculinity, making the compelling argument that there are limits to social justice activism rooted in criticizing another’s language. Namely, to have the right language, to engage in politics at a theoretical level, is classist and not always productive. In addition to being exclusionary, frameworks of criticism offer little sense of community and joy in the face of neoliberal fascism (111). In comparison, the Gezi Park public commons offers us all a glimpse into the possibility of a movement rooted in care, solidarity, joy, and ultimately, a future outside of the confines of economic, social, and emotional precarity, despite political differences—or even indifferences (111).

*Queer in Translation* is an incisive and profound analysis of the unique elements driving neoliberal Islam, as well as queer resistance. By revealing the complexity behind the weaponization of both Western economics and religious morality, Savcı contextualizes Turkish queer politics beyond a West-as-oppressor/East-as-oppressed or Islam versus modernity binary, which is sorely needed in discussions of Middle Eastern queer politics. But Savcı’s work does not end there. In her description of Gezi Park commons, Savcı offers all activists hope. Faced with the neoliberal Islamist government’s intent on “killing joy” (122), Gezi Park created a place of coexistence, where activists resisted through humor, love, and community care. No longer queer, feminist, environmental activists, or even soccer fans or “apolitical youth,” Turkish citizens shed their fixation on identity and language politics to come together to realize that marginalization against some is marginalization against all. As Savcı concludes, “knowing that being the marginal subjects of the neoliberal Islamic regime that thrives by dispossessing people of commons and of dignified lives is perhaps the only way one can be sure one is in a quest *for a life worth living*” (141, emphasis mine).

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## Author Information



### Leelan Farhan

Leelan Farhan (she/her) is a fourth-year PhD Candidate in Education at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. She also holds a Master of Information from the University of Toronto. Her doctoral work explores the creation of online, student-led, sexual violence prevention programs for university campuses using survivor-centered and interdisciplinary research methods. More broadly, her research interests can be found at the intersection of community activism, digital spaces, and feminist technologies. She is also a student representative on the Cultural Studies Association's Governing Board.

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## Article details

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## Review of *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice* by Zakiya Luna (New York University Press)

by Djuna Hallsworth | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Zakiya Luna's rich study combines comprehensive discourse analysis of political rhetoric and archival documents with her own ethnographic experiences within the reproductive justice movement. This book is an entry point into this often-marginalized arena, presenting a unique perspective informed by years of participant observation and thorough research which has produced additional projects, attesting to Luna's expertise in this field of study. As a woman of color, Luna's work is symbolically significant, and her intersectional lens renders this study broadly applicable to scholars of law, sociology, and gender studies, to policymakers and activists, and, indeed, to all women, who the reproductive justice movement indirectly or directly impacts. In tracing the way that reproductive justice has been framed as a "human right," Luna addresses the potential for the human rights discourse to deliver on its intrinsic promise to secure freedom and equity for all.

**KEYWORDS** feminism, intersectionality, human rights, reproductive justice, women of color

*Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice*. By Zakiya Luna. New York: New York University Press, 2020, 299 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4798-3129-6. US List: \$35.

It was not until more than four decades after the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the notion of "women's rights as human rights" was explicitly articulated. Though, theoretically, this was an historic step towards addressing the oppression and disempowerment of women globally, its actual impact depends upon a definition of human rights that recognizes the full spectrum of ways that harm and suffering can manifest. Zakiya Luna's timely monograph, *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights*, examines the implications of adopting a human rights discourse to conceptualize and achieve social and political justice for women. Though firmly rooted in the context of the United States, this book broadly challenges the problematic identification of rights violations "elsewhere" by states that fail to acknowledge the systematic domestic injustices they perpetuate.

With reproductive justice as her starting point, Luna bases her research on the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, or simply SisterSong: a US collective formed in 1997 as a coalition of sixteen women's organizations. As she points out, SisterSong is not the only voice in the US reproductive justice movement, but it can be credited with bringing this term into the public consciousness (6). Luna's relationship with the SisterSong community began when she was a research assistant interviewing the organization's former national coordinator, Loretta Ross, whose reflections are interspersed throughout the book. This opportunity marked the starting point in several years of participant observation and interviews, which are both directly referenced and which have indirectly contributed to Luna's comprehensive understanding of how SisterSong operates.

She acknowledges the tension between being an active contributor in the activities of SisterSong, and gathering impartial data, conceding that a shortcoming of this approach is in "the ability of the researcher to affect the research site or be affected by it" (21). Beyond this admission, though, the author reveals relatively little about her method of determining and approaching her interview subjects in the main body of the book, ambiguously stating, "Whenever possible, I identified myself as a researcher" (21). A more comprehensive description and justification of her immersive research experience with SisterSong appears in Appendix A, though this information might be better suited to a preface or to inclusion in the introduction, where the reader can gain an insight into the nature of her interactions with community members.

The book's mixed-method approach is, however, one of its strengths. By interviewing those participating in SisterSong activities, as well as those in senior positions in the Collective, Luna captures a cross-section of perspectives and identifies patterns in how her interviewees perceive, differentiate, and deploy the phrases "human rights," "social justice," and "reproductive justice." She effectively positions the vocabulary of women engaging in political action within the language of the policy that shapes their embodied experiences.

The book deploys several cogent theoretical frames, the first of which is "restrictive domestication," a phrase that describes the way "the US government has constrained the meaning of 'human rights' to suit its domestic and international needs" (4). This is contrasted with the "revolutionary domestication" of human rights by SisterSong, which aims to reconcile the specific economic and social context and conditions of the US with the seemingly universal applicability of human rights. The first chapter examines US exceptionalism and the selective uptake of human rights rhetoric in US domestic and foreign policy, providing a necessary backdrop against which to set the subsequent chapters.

Chapter two traces the ways that women of color were "pushed" out of mainstream activism and towards a new way of framing their advocacy; though abstruse, the language of human rights had the potential to accommodate the much-needed intersectional approach to reproductive justice that women's rights movements failed to foster. Yet, as chapter three expounds, the restrictive domestication of human rights in the US prompted

women of color to look beyond policymaking at a national level to debates taking place on the international stage: frequently, United Nations conferences and conventions.

Conceptualizing reproductive justice as a human right was, as covered in chapter four, a difficult and contested strategy for SisterSong to adopt, in part because of the problematic image of Western philanthropy that the phrase connotes. Yet the US “largely exempts it[self] from the very global norms it was so central in establishing” (22), and, domestically, conflates human rights with civil rights, thereby limiting their application in line with existing civil rights legislation. Crucial to note, as Luna does, is that, “unlike rights such as voting, reproductive rights, including abortion rights, are not rights previously held by men and then extended to a different group” (65). In this sense, reproductive justice is less about gender equality—with which the women’s movement is associated—and more about mitigating the economic, political and cultural factors that deny women bodily autonomy.

The second half of the book debates the semantic departure between human rights and social justice, and, at times, the discussion is weighed down by a desire to locate a cogent definition of “human rights” within the archival documents and interview material.

Throughout chapter seven, Luna characterizes her interviewees, based on their grasp of human rights, into “learners,” “skeptics,” and “interrogators.” These categories did not prove particularly effective, though, nor did the additional conceptual tool of human rights as “the ground,” “the umbrella,” and “the thread,” or as being over, under, and through SisterSong’s activities. The impulse to classify her interview data into distinct themes and responder types is understandable, but the exposition in this section was often difficult to follow on account of these groupings, which were selectively deployed at varying points throughout the chapter. Quotations were often used to support Luna’s theorizations but it was not always evident whether the responders she referenced were indicative of a broader trend, or the only examples of the phenomenon she cited. This was an ambitious chapter that aimed to present new material as well as retrospectively coding the responses into these two sets of categories, and it would have benefitted from more descriptive subheadings and signposting to frame the discussion around these ideas.

The final chapter reinforces the pertinence of this study, applying the themes raised in the interview material to the wider US political context and contemporary activism. As Luna affirms in the concluding paragraphs, the human rights lens is both a strategy and a motivation; it captures the aspiration to reframe “women’s issues” as symptoms of injustice, repositioning women of color as central, rather than marginal (218–19).

*Reproductive Rights as Human Rights* juxtaposes the palliative rhetoric of US and UN human rights promises with the voices of those involved in reproductive justice advocacy, emphasizing the urgent need for policymaking to speak with, to, and for those on the margins.

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## Author Information



Djuna Hallsworth





Djuna Hallsworth has a PhD in Gender and Cultural Studies from the University of Sydney. Her research examines the representation of mothers in Danish state-funded films and television series through the lens of social and cultural policy, and is under contract with Palgrave Macmillan as a monograph to be published in late 2021. Djuna has coordinated and lectured in cultural policy at the University of Sydney and is intrigued by the ways that top-down governance filter into on-screen imagery, marginalizing and privileging particular perspectives and experiences. She has also written on mental illness in film and television and, motivated by her own struggles with mental illness, will continue to write in this sphere.

[View all of Djuna Hallsworth's articles.](#)

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## Review of *Another Aesthetics is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War* by Jennifer Ponce de León (Duke University Press)

by Michael Dango | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** In *Another Aesthetics is Possible*, Jennifer Ponce de León looks at recent aesthetic practices in Argentina, Mexico, and the United States that shift the commonsense of history, space, and violence in order to usher in an anticapitalist and anticolonial world. With an expansive archive and a method that combines interviews, journalism, and close formal readings of art-activist practices, Ponce de León demonstrates the importance of aesthetics—and of aesthetic criticism—for making another world possible.

**KEYWORDS** neoliberalism, performance, social movements, colonialism, aesthetics, gaming, materialism

*Another Aesthetics is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War*. By Jennifer Ponce de León. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2021, 328 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1125-5. US List: \$27.95.

As global systems of racial capitalist violence entangle with the decimation of the humanities in the neoliberal university, we in cultural studies need to approach aesthetic practices not just as objects of analysis but as theoretical partners that actively bring into view a fuller account of the world and how to fashion a different one. Jennifer Ponce de León's *Another Aesthetics is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War* takes on this project in her study of experimental, trans-disciplinary, and collaborative works of media production and interventions in urban space that advance anticapitalist and anticolonial movements in Argentina, Mexico, and the United States from the past twenty-five years.

In four chapters after a theoretical introduction, Ponce de León combines formal readings of aesthetic practices with journalistic coverage and interviews of artists and collaborators. Chapter 1 focuses on the alternate reality game *Raiders of the Lost Crown* (2013), organized by the Diego de la Vega Cooperative Media Conglomerate and its CEO, Fran Ilich, with the premise of recapturing an Aztec headdress from a museum in Vienna. In the process, it provided a "stereoscopic aesthetics" that enabled players (who interacted both

in real-world and virtual space) to “[hold] together in a single field of vision the materiality of colonial practices and their systemic disavowal” (36).

Chapter 2 attends to the counter-monuments created by the Pocho Research Society of Erased and Invisible History (PRS), founded by Sandra de la Loza, including the historical plaques erected from 2002–2008 throughout Los Angeles to call attention to Chicana histories erased by ongoing gentrification and progress narratives, not just displaced “mom and pop” businesses but also queer cruising grounds and other marginalized sex public spaces. In a particularly compelling reading of the text of one plaque, a eulogy for the gay bar The Score written by Ricardo A. Bracho, Ponce de León shows how its queer heightening of somatic and olfactory senses undermines gentrification’s visual logics of zoning and beautification.

The book turns to the activities of Etcétera and Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) in Buenos Aires in chapters 3 and 4, focusing on different forms of guerrilla urban signage and street theater in the 1990s and early 2000s. GAC evolved the grassroots practice of *escraches*, which used street signs to publicly shame and harass perpetrators of human rights abuses. This signage not only bypassed the state’s rights-based monopoly on justice through community action; it also culture-jammed the state’s monopoly on visually “impos[ing] meanings on public spaces and organiz[ing] movement.” In doing so, GAC connected a critique of violence under dictatorship with the everyday violence of state-organized class warfare. Etcétera parodied political theatres—both the spectacles of human rights “truth commissions” and of democratic “electoral pageantry”—through an alternative “materialist theatre” in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal that, rather than pacifying its audience with the balm of representation, incites social action (199). Like other groups and artists discussed in this book, Etcétera treats public space as a medium like any other; these are aesthetic practices that work not on canvas but on street, building wall, and supermarket window.

The theoretical import of Ponce de León’s analysis of her case studies is captured in her title, *Another Aesthetics Is Possible*, which borrows from the Zapatistas’ assertion that “another world is possible,” as well as the claim of one of Ponce de León’s interlocutors, Fran Ilich: “There is no other culture without an other aesthetics, that is to say: an other way of seeing” (48). Aesthetics as a “way of seeing” means, for Ponce de León, not a study of art per se but “the socially forged sensory composition of a world” in which artistic practices actively participate and battle with hegemonic representations of what makes for a literal “common sense”: how people intuitively perceive their world. Throughout the book, Ponce de León affixes domains of experience to this sense of the aesthetic such as an “aesthetics of history” that shapes what is perceived as past versus present, and an “aesthetics of violence” that conditions what even registers as violence in the popular imagination.

The practices Ponce de León studies reorganize the hegemonic common sense of history and violence. For instance, showing how colonial violence is not part of Mexico’s past but constitutive of the present neoliberal order, or how official accounts of violence in Argentina limited to political violence under the last dictatorship obscure the ordinariness of state terrorism in the age of security (141). The counter practices also work by affirming

an alternate world, “producing conditions that allow others to perceive it as a real world” (8). This may sound a lot like Jacques Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible”—in which an aesthetic discourse actively delimits what is intelligible and therefore what can be politicized—but for Ponce de León, aesthetics shapes our common sense not just discursively but materially. Ilich’s *Raiders* game, for instance, incorporated a marketplace for Zapatista coffee into its gameplay (63). Ilich also created a cooperative Internet server in 2005, Possible Worlds, a material infrastructure that was an effort, Ilich says in a phrase again anticipating the book’s title, to “practice another internet politics” (48). Ponce de León says of Sandra de la Loza’s founding of the PRS, that it “is a meta-artwork . . . that also functions as a platform through which she has collaborated with other artists and writers” (81). The production of a “platform” for collaboration—from Ilich’s server to the “embodied pedagogical” theatre of Etcetera—is usually the point of the aesthetic practices surveyed in this book, not just re-distributing the sensible but proliferating physical sites for active political organizing and direct action (168).

The emphasis on material production, and on transforming the mode of production of aesthetic practices themselves, suggests the Marxist influences on Ponce de León’s book as well as its subjects. In addition to the Marxist influence on, for instance, the Zapatistas, there is a Marxist aesthetic-theoretical genealogy that makes frequent appearances in the book, from Walter Benjamin on the aestheticization of politics under fascism to, as previously mentioned, Brechtian theatre and its progeny. In the introduction, Ponce de León joins her project not just to Marx but also to “Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and others” who “reject the ontological division of biological and social life,” but neither of these makes a more than passing reappearance later (4). This is not a criticism, but I was at times left wondering what a fuller engagement with a perspective like Wynter’s might also add to the analysis. For instance, Wynter’s sense of desire as “a new meta-biological object of knowledge constituted by discourse,” which led her to theorize a “rhetorical motivation system” in which aesthetic discourse intervenes at the level of “genetic motivation for organic species,” reframes one of the final guerrilla performances Ponce de León analyzes from GAC, *Seguri\$mo*.<sup>1</sup> Enacted in 2003, *Seguri\$mo* adapted the visual language of supermarket ads to “sell” weapons with histories of repression from colonialism to the contemporary police state. The ads hail a middle class complicit in buying neo-colonialism through their eager support of a private security market. But as Ponce de León narrates, the ads did not blunt this desire: “Some shoppers expressed genuine interest in purchasing the products advertised in GAC’s flyer, apparently oblivious to its satirical tone” (225), a consequence she attributes to the fact that the interpolated middle class no longer has an attachment to nonviolence and therefore is not affected by the demystification of a violent state: “The expectation that these things would be morally repugnant to a liberal subject makes sense only within a perspective calibrated to the mythologies, rather than the material history, of liberalism” (226).

Wynter might say that the ads also fail to recalibrate the “rhetorical motivation systems” in which abolishing the police is itself desirable, in part by failing to intervene in the fantasy of security itself. Security is “mythology,” to use the term Ponce de León subordinates to “material” history, but *Seguri\$mo*’s taking on a long temporality from colonialism to neoliberalism—which is to say multiple iterations of capitalism and its material reality—affirms this mythology’s overdetermination, its relative autonomy from any particular

reality. It is part of a larger violent rhetorical motivation system that would require cultural battle at the level of, indeed, rhetoric. What would it mean to consider the political failure of aesthetic practices as *aesthetic* failures, a failure of form and not just a casualty of material history?

It is a testament to the reparative ethos of *Another Aesthetics is Possible* that Ponce de León allows for little failure in her archive: “Rather than reading *Segurí\$imo* as a failed exercise in provoking consciousness-raising discomfort in its audience, it can be read as a realist work (in a Brechtian sense) whose social critique is enriched by consideration of its unexpected reception” (226). The surprisingly passive voice raises the question of who is doing this reading and to whom. This is also a moment of modesty on Ponce de León’s part, since who is doing the reading is, of course, the critic, rather than the middle class who failed to be correctly hailed or the GAC who failed to provoke unease.

This book often attributes agency to aesthetic practices—to how they actively reframe the world, rework common sense, incite action—but to some extent, the question of whether these practices succeed at their aim is an empirical question, one for social scientists to take up to determine whether an audience experienced the desired consequences. Where the critic comes in, where the humanist matters, is in working with the aesthetic practice—working with, but also within and alongside and through—to bring out the formal meanings that could themselves actualize the world they envision.

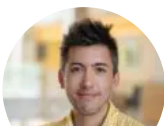
In an interview with Ponce de León, Sandra de la Loza provides her own view of the politics of art: “No, I don’t think art’s going to keep the US from bombing Iraq. No, I don’t think Siqueiros’s murals were going to make the working class rise up and overthrow bourgeois society. I think that’s just a simplification of what social change is . . . . The impact of an act, a poem, a discourse isn’t known until maybe, one, two, three generations afterwards” (110). The role of criticism is to enable this impact, to keep the aesthetic practice alive for one, two, three generations afterwards so it persists as a resource for building another world. *Another Aesthetics is Possible* is an exemplary model of performing this role.

## Notes

1. Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 229. See also Sylvia Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice,” in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 237–79. [↗](#)

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## Review of *Infrastructures of Apocalypse: American Literature and the Nuclear Complex* by Jessica Hurley (University of Minnesota Press)

by Douglas Dowland | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Jessica Hurley's *Infrastructures of Apocalypse: American Literature and the Nuclear Complex* examines how postwar literature has responded to discourses, both official and unofficial, of nuclear weaponry and nuclear power. Hurley explores how literature from a variety of genres offer a different sense of past, present, and future in response, thus constructing the apocalypse as a transfiguration rather than as a revelation.

**KEYWORDS** apocalypse, narrative, literature, nuclear, containment

*Infrastructures of Apocalypse: American Literature and the Nuclear Complex*. By Jessica Hurley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 294 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-5179-0874-4. US List: \$27.00.

The discourse of the nuclear is rife with arrogance: we think we can control it; and we think that if we cannot control it, what comes after is something that we will somehow (want to) survive. Jessica Hurley thoroughly challenges this arrogance throughout *Infrastructures of Apocalypse*, revealing how the assumptions of the American nuclear regime, from its sense of time and space to their sense of what constitutes the human, is a web of discourse that is often under contestation by a gamut of writers. These writers envision apocalypses that are neither ending nor revelation. Instead, they "use apocalypse to transfigure the present: to see the other possibilities that reside in it . . . constructing only a transfigured instant but wholly transfigured timelines" (4). In doing so, their narratives capture a present that is as un-survivable as the postapocalyptic nuclear future, a present that is not sustainable without imagining it otherwise.

Hurley's first chapter, "White Sovereignty and the Nuclear State," offers an insightful reading of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Drawing on discourses of Orientalism, Hurley sees at work in Rand's writing the threat of totalitarianism encoded as the threat of becoming "Oriental": in this way, Rand draws upon an unfortunate heritage of "yellow peril" discourse that demonstrates "the centrality of race to her conception of personhood" (54). Hurley's deft reading of Rand's erratic tome for its depiction and description of "Orientals" works



well to show how Rand employs the nuclear apocalypse as one in which only the (white, entrepreneurial) elite will survive to take on their roles as frontiersman in a land ruined by a despotism-inducing welfare state. This sort of white fantasy-making returns (sadly, unsurprisingly) in Hurley's chapter on the 1980s: both chapters reveal how some see the apocalypse not as a horror but as the ultimate success of white privilege.

Chapter Two, "Civil Defense and Black Apocalypse," is a study of James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren*. Here, Hurley's focus is on how these novels' characters "find themselves lost, wandering in memory and in cities that cannot be read, scrolled environments that operate under lawless grammars" (76). Whereas Baldwin's book is a "fictional attempt to reckon with the disappointment" that white America is more than willing to disinvest itself of equality in the name of its own sustenance, Delany's book reveals the "essential conservatism" (98) of plots of racial unity, exposing how "the future can only appear within the terms set by the past" (118). Baldwin's disappointment is thus a lost faith in the traditional sense of the apocalypse bringing about redemption: Delany's playing with time (and space) in *Dhalgren* disconnects totally the glue between events that gives the present any sense of having a past and a future.

Hurley shows us through her third chapter, "Star Wars, AIDS, and Queer Endings," a way to critique the resurgence of the nuclear apocalypse during the Reagan administration. She reminds us how the "insistent backward connection between the 1980s and the 1950s that allows neoconservative America to imagine itself as safe through a retroactive temporality" performs a type of "retrocontainment" (125). Reagan's "Star Wars" project comes with a 1980s promise, perhaps achieved for a sliver of time in the late 1940s, that the US could have supremacy over nuclear weapons, a new version of "a past where America was secure in its nuclear superiority" (131). Tony Kushner's *Angels* subverts this in its use of characters from the past who live out alternative futures: uncannily, it "makes us aware of our own existence as 'future dead people,'" a chilling reminder that containment, current or retro, is always a fiction (149).

The fourth chapter, "Nuclear Waste, Native America, Narrative Form," reads David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* alongside Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. Together, Hurley shows how they remind us that "the US nuclear complex has been a colonial project" from its inception (178). Wallace's "Concavity/Convexity Zone" or the stone snake that emerges in Silko's novel work as figures to how "the Euro-American temporality of cause and effect" ruin the landscape and individual lives, how our relationship to nuclear waste extends far beyond ourselves and our conception of time and space (187). Each reminds us that the nuclear regime comes with a *longue durée* that is ultimately truly unfathomable, an apocalypse that is neither distant nor fast but present and plodding. It is a future that we are living, incommensurably, now.

Hurley's reading of the postwar and the postmodern is particularly effective in the nontraditional examples she offers at the beginning of each chapter, whether they be memoranda from the head of the Atomic Energy Commission, the chillingly racist imagery used by the Federal Civil Defense Administration, the haunting reminder that atomic tests on US soil were often named after Native American tribes, or the bureaucratically mundane

discourse surrounding Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a deep geological depository in New Mexico. I particularly enjoyed Hurley's reading of Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* alongside the Fukushima Daiichi disaster that serves as the book's coda.

Nuclear waste is "our own self-created predator," Hurley writes (202). As her book brings to our attention, it is a predator we have created, complete with an infrastructure that justifies its presence in the present. A predator we foolishly think that we can control, it shows what we are willing to deprive future generations of: an uncontaminated planet, a more equal society, and the fascinating narratives that would come from it.

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